SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY • HORROR

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THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

ALAN MOORE
FROM HELL AND BACK

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THE COEN BROTHERS
THE ART OF MAKING CULT MOVIES

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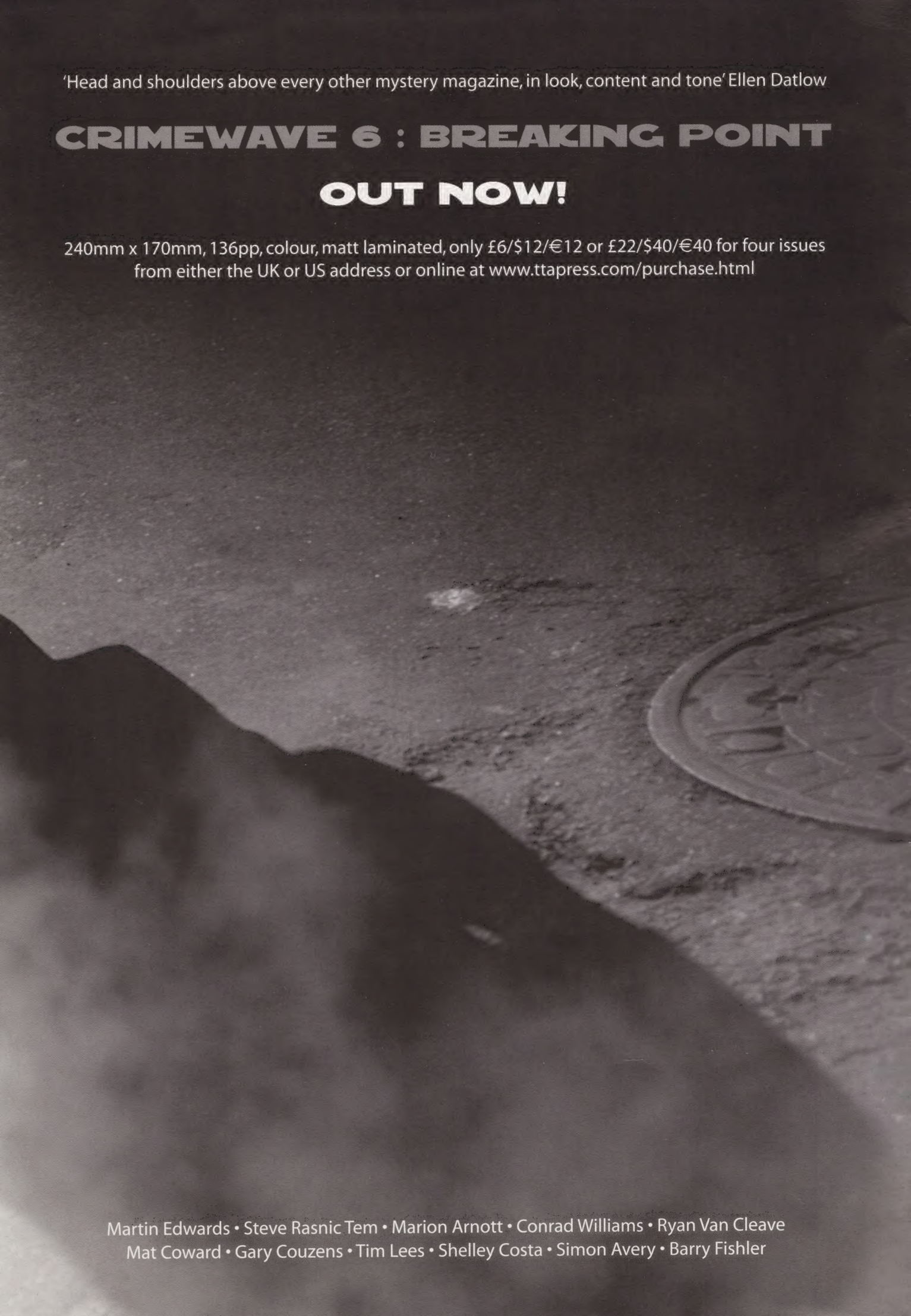

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2001 wasn't a bad year for recognition of TTA stories in 'Best Of' anthologies. The following stories have been selected by Stephen Jones for *Best New Horror*: 'Shite-Hawks' by Muriel Gray, 'The Lost District' by Joel Lane (both TTA27), and 'By Her Hand, She Draws You Down' by Douglas Smith (TTA28).

Our sister magazine *Crimewave* gets in on the act too, with 'Crocodile Lady' by Christopher Fowler (CW5) also reprinted in *Best New Horror*. Talking of *Crimewave* – because the chilling but beautiful *Crimewave 6: Breaking Point* is out now! – 'Prussian Snowdrops' by Marion Arnott (CW4) and Christopher Fowler's 'Crocodile Lady' (CW5) will appear in Ellen Datlow & Teri Windling's *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*; while 'Prussian Snowdrops' again, Simon Avery's 'Leaving Seven Sisters' (CW4) and Brian Hodge's 'Miles to Go Before I Weep' (CW4) will all be reprinted in Ed Gorman's *The World's Finest Crime & Mystery III*.

No 2001 TTA stories will be reprinted in any SF anthologies, as far as I know. Maybe this isn't surprising because many of them tend to skate along the borders of the genre, or maybe they're just crap, but if it's something you have an opinion on please do write in or post a message on the TTA Central board at the website. You can also talk directly with many of the magazine's contributors, or pop into the chat room.

We're gradually adding more interactive content to the website. We sneaked in a poll for the TTA29 stories, just for fun, which seemed to be quite popular considering we made no real fuss of it. At the time of writing over 160 votes have been cast, with Andrew Humphrey's 'Open the Box' out in front with 40+ votes, and 'Song For Edna' by Barry Fishler, 'The Life to Come' by Tim Lees and 'That Jellyfish Man Keeps A-Rollin' by Leslie What all vying for second place. The TTA29 poll will be closed by the time you read this, but it will be replaced by one for TTA30, so please visit the website and vote for your favourite story of this issue.

Further additions to the website will include a vast selection of reviews, more extracts from the magazine(s), and the webzine *Third Wave*. *Third Wave* will be an online extension of *The 3rd Alternative* and *Crimewave*, with original content that is 100% suited to the net. There'll be regular columns by Mike O'Driscoll and James Van Pelt; The Correspondent feature that didn't quite make a home in these pages will transfer under a new title to *Third Wave*, with slippy travel/news reports from around the globe (first up is Andrew Hook from Thailand); Paul Meloy will write The Panda Diaries (no, I'm not going to explain this, just turn up!); we'll make use of dynamic web media with things like video diaries (Simon Ings); there'll be links to other fiction and non-fiction, and much, much more.

A lot of people are very grateful to Steve Aylett for bringing the underrated Jeff Lint to their attention in TTA29. So many in fact that with Steve's help we're setting up a special website to celebrate the man and his works.

One if not both of these exciting new ventures will be online now, so please keep visiting the site, and while you're there please also sign up for the TTA Press newsletter, so we can keep you updated on developments, new issues, etc via email.

If you don't have access to email or the internet, please don't think that we're forgetting you. Good old-fashioned letters and phone calls are always welcome, which should please The Dodo!

Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy this issue. We're already hard at work on TTA31. Coming up we have interviews with Brian Aldiss and Michael Marshall Smith; artwork by Mike Bohatch, Marc Werner, Rob Middleton, Joachim Luetke (who nearly won an Oscar), Chris Nurse and others; and brand new stories by Gala Blau, Conrad Williams, Mat Coward, Christopher Fowler, Tony Richards, Sarah Singleton, John Aegard, Ryan Van Cleave . . . with plenty more gems to unearth, no doubt, between now and then!

PETER GRIC — COVER

Peter was born in 1968 in Brno, Czech Republic. He studied at the Academy of Arts in Vienna, and has since been a guest lecturer there. He now lives and works in Vienna. This piece is called 'Experiment 1'.

www.gric.at

BRUCE RICHARDSON — AMBER RAIN

Bruce recently completed an HND in graphic design and illustration at the Oxfordshire School of Art and Design. He has now started his own small studio and has illustrated a children's book as well as Mutants Are Everywhere Phase II.

www.funkyimage.co.uk

SIMON DURIC — THE SUBLIMINAL SON

Simon was born in 1978 in a tiny nondescript village in Derbyshire, but now lives in Nottingham. He's been to university twice, leaving the first time because the course was crap, and the second time because he was asked.

www.redsine.com/duric8

CHRIS NURSE — A FREE MAN

Chris works prolifically in the field of commercial art and design, producing editorial and book cover illustrations for a variety of clients both in the UK and the USA. He would like to dedicate these images to Nancy Dickinson.

www.chris nurse.co.uk • talk to Chris at www.ttapress.com/message.html

RODDY WILLIAMS — THE GOLDEN LEGEND

Roddy studied illustration at The London Institute and Middlesex University. A chequered career includes writing for a Theatre Company, running set-design workshops and writing material for his brother, an alternative comedian. Roddy made this illustration entirely out of different kinds of bread!

NIGEL POTTER — CARE IN THE CONTINUUM

Nigel spent two years Great Yarmouth College of Art & Design and finished the course feeling disillusioned with the whole thing. He then spent ten years working in various dead-end jobs before doing a Foundation course at Norwich School of Art & Design and a BA in Graphic Design.

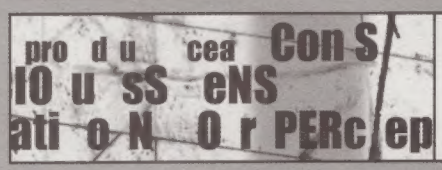
BOB LIBBY — THE EDGE OF ENGLAND

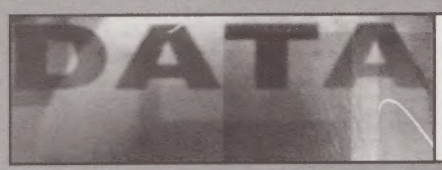
Bob has been a working artist for about twelve years. He has worked in just about every kind of medium and finally devoted himself to digital imaging a litte over three years ago. He lives in Portland, Oregon. Bob did the cover art for TTA29.

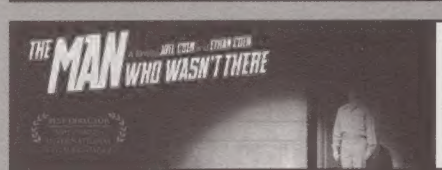
www.fallenangelstudios.com

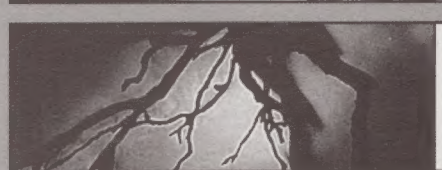
COMING SOON

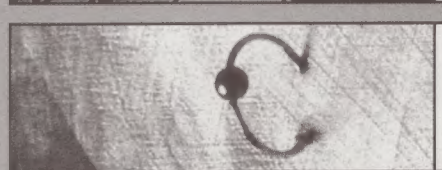
Gala Blau's debut story made a big impact, with reprints in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* and *Best New Horror*. Gala's second story, 'The Routine', will appear in TTA31. We have other stories by Conrad Williams, Mat Coward, Sarah Singleton (art by Mike Bohatch, right), John Aegard, Christopher Fowler . . .

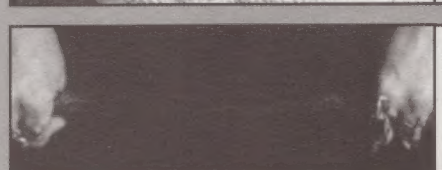












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When Colin raised the window to replenish the living room's baked air, he noticed the first specks of water on the pane. It was a fine rain, the kind that effervesces, prickles your skin. He watched the tiny droplets coalesce, gain mass enough to overcome the surface tension and stream down the glass. Each little river scintillated, distinctly pale amber in colour. An unnatural shade – even for a place like Glasgow. Even in a time like now.

Of course, it was only a trick of the light. The city's atmosphere was never *that* toxic. Inevitably, after so many days of unrelenting heat, a foundry of cloud had massed over the city, compressing the evening's remaining sunlight to the weak radiance of cooling ingots. Soon those foundry walls would break open, flash-firing the city with summer lightning, and cooling its inhabitants with such a deluge that the pavements would steam.

Down in the street a woman was crossing the road. Colin only saw her for a moment before she darted between two vans, but there was something about her. Her hair was different, the style of her clothing – a strappy blue summer dress – unfamiliar, and it had been, what, eight months? He almost didn't recognise her, but he was sure that it was Paddy.

When the door entry rasped he almost ran to let her in.

Paddy was soaked through, and immediately headed to the bathroom to dry off. To give himself something to do, Colin slipped a few slices of cheese on toast under the grill. He remembered to be liberal with the Tabasco.

"Smells good," Paddy said, sitting at the table. She had found his old black jumper. It had always suited her, the way it framed the old Goth-chic cosmetic pallor she had favoured back then. She looked good in it now too – but in a different way. She'd allowed her hair to grow, washed out the wacky colours. Now it coiled loose around her face, strands clumped with some residual dampness she'd failed to towel out. Her face too – minus the habitual heavy application of eyeliner and the glittering encrustations of those once beloved piercings, she looked somehow both older and childish. At any rate, life appeared to be treating her well. The pallor gone, her skin radiated health. A sheen of perspiration anointed her brow, nose, cheeks.

"What?" she said.

Caught staring, Colin switched off the grill, and slipped the contents of the pan on to a plate which he placed in the centre of the table. "It's just a surprise to see you." He sat opposite her. "A nice one," he added, nudging the plate towards her.

She took a slice, chewed off a corner, trailing filaments of melted cheese. "Thanks, Col," she said at length, watching him pour two mugs of treacle-coloured tea.

"Thanks for what?" he said.

"I dunno . . . " She stalled, brow creasing as she searched for the right words. Steam from her mug rose into her face. "I think I expected you to tell me where to go. But I should have known you wouldn't. You always were too nice by half." Paddy closed her eyes, inhaled the vapour. "It's so difficult now – to know about people," she said, opened her eyes, offered a tiny smile. "Thanks for still being you."

Colin shrugged, returned the smile. As if still being himself was nothing, had required no effort to reconstitute his personality from the mess she'd left behind. As if *still being himself* could possibly have any kind of meaning. After five years with her, as a single entity – sharing a life, a home, a tight band of friends. Then four months of slick, almost invisible unravelling. One splintered evening of mutual abuse, the subject of which: an itemised mobile phone bill and one particular friend. Alan. Half an hour walking the streets to cool off, mentally drafting plans of conciliation. Then coming home to Life Without Paddy.

Colin was surprised to find that the anger he thought he had been saving up had somehow leaked away. He wasn't even interested any more in how the Paddy and Alan thing had panned out. There was no longer any resonance of the fury and frustration here. In recent months, his flat had become a place he came back to only to sleep, or more often *not sleep*. It had been too long since anyone but himself had as much as spoken aloud in these rooms. He was just glad she was here.

"So, can I stay?" Her voice cracked.

"Reading my mind again?" An old shared joke.

"Yeah, and it's about as entertaining as that paper you work for," she rejoined. A spark of the Paddy he used to know. Funny how suddenly the flat felt a little like a home again.

The way it had felt when they were together.

Before the aliens came.

Colin watched television while Paddy took a bath. A political discussion show murmured away on turned-down volume. He was tired of hearing the protracted post-mortems caused by the Prime Minister's resignation the previous month. On one side it had become a blustering defence from the loyal elements within his own party – John MacDougall, they claimed, was ill, his unexpected resignation made under severe stress. At the same time, the opposition parties had launched into a feeding frenzy at the political opportunity, clamouring for a general election. Both sides continued to make nervous denials that, despite the recent claims of the country's erstwhile leader, the UK was *not* currently, nor indeed ever had been, host to agencies of extraterrestrial origin.

Colin flipped channels. *Question Time* was replaced by recent footage of the man himself. MacDougall looked haggard, spoke with uncharacteristic hesitancy, but Colin could see neither duplicity nor delusion in the man's face as he mouthed the words that had become his last sound bite.

"I'm sorry." And, "No, I can't explain." And, "There's nothing we can do."

NEIL WILLIAMSON

Colin muted the television entirely, but the screen continued to sheet blue lightning around the room.

Eventually, back along the hall, the bathroom door opened. Colin waited a few minutes, switched off the set and followed Paddy through to the bedroom. She was lying on her side, facing away from the window, into darkness.

He lay down behind her. Not too close, but close enough to smell apple-scented bath-soak, and the dampness of her hair. He couldn't tell if she was asleep yet, but then she reached round and pulled his arm around her. He drifted off trying to listen to her breathing, but could hear only the rattle of rain on the window.

The only difference between Holyrood and Westminster was in the accents of the squabbling. The paper had sent Colin over to Edinburgh to photograph Hibernian's new French striker down at Easter Road. Afterwards, he'd taken the opportunity to drop in at the Scottish Parliament where the Education Minster was unveiling a new pay deal for teachers.

Colin watched from the gallery as the minister tried stoically to deliver her speech over the heckles of the Scottish Nationalists. He sighted her through the viewfinder of his SLR, focused the telephoto lens on the tension in her neck, around her eyes. A wayward strand of hair slipped across her face. He snapped her flicking it away.

"Does any of this *matter* any more?" A skinny, middle-aged man in denims farther along in the public gallery. He looked like he'd neither slept nor washed for days. The minister stammered to a halt, looking up at him, able to continue only when he had been removed by security. Colin framed a quick shot of the two uniforms huckling the guy away. That would fit nicely into the paper's OUT THE ALIENS campaign – the most public face of a pressure group aimed at getting the government to back the ex-Prime Minister's story, and come clean about what was happening. A typically tabloid effort, but it was having an effect.

It didn't matter if MacDougall was lying, or mad, or, against all odds, actually telling the truth. Half the country believed him – half the world, it seemed, and many had had, if not similar, then analogous experiences. Reports came in daily, everyone had a story, knew someone, who knew someone, whose husband, mother, next door neighbour had had an experience of some sort. ALIENS IN MY WATERING CAN, ALIENS IN THE TELEVISION, ALIENS IN THE LITTLE CHEF OFF THE M74, MY GRANDFATHER IS A GREY, MY TEACHER IS A POD PERSON, I WAS SEDUCED ON ROHYPNOL BY TV'S LIEUTENANT WORF – AND I WAS SAVING MYSELF FOR MR SPOCK. The stories flooded in from Glasgow and Edinburgh, the remote reaches of the Highlands, all throughout Britain, Europe, the planet. From Finland to Portugal, Argentina to Canada, and oh, by God, yes, all over the States. Only, there was no evidence. No pictures. No recordings. Just stories, and few of the details were wholly consistent.

The media were loving it. Even if the world wasn't being visited, it was gripped by the *idea* of such an invasion. A quiet, nervous paralysis. Markets were down, investments delayed, everyone waiting. The politicians tried to keep things ticking along, but since they could neither officially prove nor disprove the stories it could only look like they were covering something up. The editors played the uncertainty like expert anglers.

When he returned to the flat it was so still that Colin assumed immediately that Paddy was gone. He had spent day mulling over their strange, edgy encounter the previous evening, and had half convinced himself he'd dreamt the whole thing. He stooped to retrieve the mail from behind the door, placing the envelopes unopened on top of the pile of bills and circulars and invitations to take out new credit cards. And wondered what it took to upset things enough to bring society finally to a halt. If it was true that aliens were among them, how could it be that he could still buy fresh pesto in Safeway? How could any credit card company seriously offer him a free couple of grand and trust that he'd pay it back, plus interest? How did the buses run, and new movies open at the cinema? If the world was so overrun with extraterrestrials, surely it would all stop. And everyone would *know*. For sure. There would be photographs in the papers, amateur video footage, pictures of grey humanoids, shadowy space ships, *something*; interviews with astronomers, global summits, vigilantes, public unrest, martial law.

And because people would know, they'd recognise that they needed one another.

And Paddy would still be there.

For the second time in two days she surprised him. On the kitchen table Colin found two supermarket bags. Their contents: one bottle of Merlot, one packet of fresh cappelletti, one jar of pesto, mushrooms, capsicums, and a bag of salad leaves, with a bottle of Caesar dressing. Snap. His own bags contained the same – minus the dressing. Paddy had been a selective food lover. She knew what she liked, and if she liked it, she loved it. She'd hated Caesar dressing.

He found her in the bathroom. Colin hovered at the door, despite having seen her naked countless times before. From there he could see one leg arched above the rim of the bath. The leg glistened pale and pink under the stark bathroom light, and he could just make out part of what looked like a tattoo – a recent one, raw and scabbed – as the leg oscillated gently from side to side. The rhythmic lapping of water counterpointed their conversation.

"Thanks for getting the food in," Colin said. "And for remembering that I like that Caesar dressing. But you should have got something we both like."

"It's only food, Col. It doesn't matter to me. I don't have much of an appetite these days." Her voice sounded strange. Perhaps it was the acoustics that made it sound so distant. For a moment Colin wondered if she were on something. The thought was as absurd as the idea of Paddy having no appetite – she didn't even smoke. But then people changed, didn't they?

True to her word, when they had prepared the food, Paddy did little more than push it around her plate. Colin fared little better, the kitchen's humidity whittling his hunger to a vague discomfort. They made up for it, though, with the wine. They drank so they wouldn't have to talk, then took the second bottle into the bedroom to watch the now spectacularly torrential rain. It hissed onto the pavement outside, streamed down the drains, flared amber on the window glass as the streetlights stuttered to life.

Paddy turned away from the window, moved her palm from the pane to his face. Her hand was cool and clammy. There was something in her expression. Some kind of need. Colin remembered that she didn't articulate her feelings well. She had often needed help finding the words.

"Paddy, what's this all about?" he began.

"Shh." She stopped his words with her fingers, and then as if they might leak through between them, with her lips, ensuring whatever he said was swallowed down inside her.

When they made love, skin to skin on white sheets rucked beneath them like time-frozen waves, Colin noticed that her skin was damp with sweat from the outset, and for the first time he wondered if she might be ill. Perhaps a flu virus of which she was unaware; maybe something more serious. The need he had sensed in her was obvious now in the hunger of her mouth, the clutch of her hands on his back, the strength and urgency of her legs, pulling him deep into her, where she boiled around him with a scalding liquidity. It was as if her entire body were deliquescing from the inside out. And yet,

even locked in her embrace, Colin felt external to the process. There had always been an element of this with Paddy. She was so contained. It was her way, when she allowed herself to be fucked, to keep her pleasures to herself, internalised. Eyes closed, focussing on whatever was going on inside her, acknowledging nothing else. When she came, her breath sounded like steam.

While Paddy slept immediately, twisted around with ropes of sheet, Colin found rest harder to come by. He was staring at the wedge of light fanning across her thigh, illuminating the tattoo. He could see now that it was a swallow – so unoriginal that it could have been picked at random from a tattoo parlour wall. The mundanity of it disappointed him. Outside he heard the occasional surf of cars passing along the rain-slicked street.

He was still awake when Paddy's sleeping body coiled itself tight and foetal and, shaking with tension, she uttered a sequence of throaty moans of such sexual intensity that he became immediately aroused, although he knew that her pleasure had nothing to do with him. Whatever caused Paddy such passion in her dreaming had more effect on her than he ever had. In a few minutes the shaking had subsided, her body relaxed, and the moans faded into the regular breathing of sleep.

It surprised Colin that Paddy persisted in hanging around. It was what he wanted, of course, but that he might get what he wanted did not seem right. She was waiting for him the next evening when he returned from a brass-monkey shift outside the Glasgow Sheriff Court where a prominent local mobster had been been convicted of several major drugs offences. Two frozen hours for a blanket-over-the-head shot at best.

Paddy was dressed for an evening out. Obviously she remembered that his Tuesday nights were habitually spent at the Carnarvon. This Tuesday Colin wasn't sure if he wanted to go, but Paddy persuaded him.

"It's good to keep these routines going, isn't it?" she said.

Colin didn't know what routines Paddy kept going. As far as he could tell she hadn't left his flat in the last two days.

The Carnarvon, a fair trek up to St Georges Road at the periphery of the West End, was all cigarette-burned leatherette and chipped formica. They'd settled on it because the beer was cheap, there was no karaoke or covers band like the earsplitting Young Neils, who 'rocked the free world' at the nearby Wintersgills at unpredictable intervals, and most of all because it had no more than a dozen other regulars. On Tuesdays they practically had the place to themselves.

That night, however, the pub was packed. They found Colin's friends crushed around a single table. Longer standing acquaintances raised eyebrows when they recognised Paddy. Colin looked around the assembly. Here were virtually all the people he might count as friends. A few: Dave, Archie, Ewan and Shell, were core Tuesday-nighters. Others were occasional attendees, partners or friends of friends. One or two faces he hadn't seen in years. "The gang's all here," he said.

"Aye, and they're thirsty," replied Deepak, waving a half-full pint glass in his direction.

Glasses were filled and drained often during the evening, resulting in an unsteady megalith of towering glass on the table. Colin made the effort to keep the conversation varied, but inevitably it found its way back to the subject they were all trying to avoid. Ewan was forced to expend a deal of energy defending the numerous television science fiction series of which he was a fan. Their anthro-centric, American aliens, he argued, could not be expected to prepare the world for the *real thing*. It was only entertainment after all. Nevertheless, Dave said, the images these shows presented, along with certain blockbuster movies, formed the basis of public expectation when it came to the extraterrestrial, and *this* – whatever *this* was that was currently being experienced – was just too strange to comprehend. It was so subtle, so tangential. "It's almost as if nothing is happening at all," he said.

"Maybe that's it," said Ewan. "And *this* is all some kind of mass delusion."

"A delusion so convincing that it fills the churches, and the B&Bs in Bonnybridge, and the morgue slabs with the ones who can't cope with it?" Shell replied quietly.

"Isn't that one definition of a religion?" someone else said. Colin couldn't see who. "Just what we need on this planet is a new religion." Two or three people laughed darkly.

"Religions usually require a measure of blind faith," Dave mused. "This is different. People are reacting to personal experiences here. Private raptures."

"Well, not me," said Ewan. "I've not seen a thing. And neither has my family, or to my knowledge anyone I know."

"Same here," said Dave, and a number of others chorused their agreement. Shell and Deepak looked into their drinks and said nothing. There was a dangerous moment then, that Colin saw with uncomfortable clarity. During that moment any one of them could have pursued the experiences of the group's tacit dissenters, but that would have turned the theoretical into the practical, and, in doing so, crowbarred open the carefully maintained consensus normality that persisted around the table. No one did. The moment passed and the talk reverted to teasing Ewan about his choices of entertainment.

Shortly after, Paddy touched Colin's arm and asked to go home. He handed her the keys, not wishing to leave this island of camaraderie just yet. In the event, the talkers strove to keep going a little longer but the spirit of the gathering had been undermined, and people started to drift off into the night. Besides, he had been worrying about Paddy.

When he got home he went straight to the bathroom. By the flaccid way she lay in the cooling water, only her nostrils and mouth breaking the surface, he thought that she had drowned. The way her hair floated like weed. The way her white skin, apart from the dark blot of the tattoo, goose-fleshed. The way her eyes stared, oblivious. Only the rapid puffs of breath steaming the air told him she was alive. That, and the mottled rashes chasing each other across her skin like the shadows of clouds. At first he hoped this effect was a trick of the light and water, but saw that it was too regular. The shifting shapes began at her sternum, and radiated outwards across her breasts and belly, sweeping down her arms and legs to her extremities, and then smoothly back again to the centre. Her face was a confusion of overlapping flushes. Colin burned with questions about this illness – it was clear now that's what it was - but he could not talk to her like this.

Twenty minutes later Paddy came into the back room where he was leafing through some binders of old work. The blue towelling robe she wore was damp at the collar.

"Can I shoot you?" he asked. "Please."

She was crying, but nodded. "Over here?"

"Yes, the chair's good." He handed her the binder to look at while he set up his gear. "You've changed," he said, noticing that she had slipped a contact sheet out of its plastic pocket.

"I look so young in these," Paddy said with a small laugh. "Look at my hair. And all that make up. What was I like?"

"You were beautiful," Colin said, tightening the locks on his tripod. "But that's not what I'm talking about. You're like a completely different person to the Paddy that . . . " He hadn't meant to bring it up, but she already knew what was coming. "That left," he finished.

"Well, that's how it happens," he heard her say, as he reached behind the reflectors to flick the lights on. There was a defensive edge to her voice. "Sometimes people appear unrecognisable

hair like wire
her eyes stared

after a relationship has ended. Like you never knew the real person all that time, or like they shed the personality you knew like an unwanted skin." She sounded like she meant it. If it hadn't been for her illness he might even have been convinced.

"That's not what I'm talking about either," he said, sighting through the viewfinder. "It's more subtle than that." He hadn't intended for her to take the robe off, but now it lay on the floor beside the chair he knew that he needed her to be as open to him as possible. The indirect lighting made the sheen on her skin luminescent. The tattoo glistened as if freshly inked. He focussed tight on the tattoo, squeezed off a shot. Tracked up the s-curve of her hip and waist to the well of her navel, took a second.

Paddy sighed. "You always did pay too much attention to the details," she said.

"What do you mean?" A curve of breast obscured by an arm. The hairs at the crook of the elbow sleek with moisture.

"Nothing," she said. "It's just you. The way you look at the world, noticing the tiny things, but never quite aware of the whole picture."

Was that how he came across? Myopic and obsessed with minutiae? He didn't think that was true, it was just that he knew the world at large would roll on whether he noticed it or not – so why bother? But this was straying from the point. This wasn't about him.

"I want to know what it's like," he said. The corner of her mouth twitched with conflicting emotions. He photographed that too.

"I can't tell you," she said.

"You wouldn't – "

"I wouldn't understand?" he interrupted.

"I can't explain it. It's like a new kind of weather, or a new note squeezed into the scale, or like a colour no one's ever seen before. How can you explain something like that?" A bright eye, hazel iris on pure white. Pupil wide and depthless. If he could focus tight enough, Colin thought he might be able to see *it* inside her, looking out. Whatever this thing was that caused her illness.

"Please try," he said. "What do they look like?"

"I don't know," she said. "I never saw anything. One minute I was talking on the phone to my mum, and then . . . "

"I need to know," he persisted.

"Col," she said. "It's no use. I think it's different for everybody. Maybe some people *do* see little green men, and maybe some see God, and some Yogi-fucking-Bear. But not me. I think whatever it is – whatever *they* are – looks into people and finds something that no one else has, perhaps the single element that makes them an individual, and then they tweak it to see what happens." There was a weariness in her voice now. He wondered if this illness was killing her.

"I don't know if they are aliens or not," she said, "but I do know they weren't here a month ago – none of this weird shit was happening a month ago – so it's likely isn't it? Whoever they are, I think they are simply curious about humans. They're just giving us a prod and a poke."

He put the camera down. "I envy you," he said.

"Do you? I'm scared. I don't think I'm even human any more."

In the night, when they held each other, the warmth of skin, the strength of muscle and bone, the vitality of two pulses, Colin thought he was convinced that Paddy was still human. What else could she be?

Later when she slept he got out of bed and took a long bath. Eventually the water cooled and his skin wrinkled. When he started to shiver he climbed out, dried off and returned to bed.

In the morning Paddy was gone. Really gone this time. He knew it from the moment he woke in an empty bed, but he checked the back room, the living room, the kitchen. In the bathroom the towels were lying in the bath where he had left them the previous night.

Even knowing she was gone he went out to look. His street deserted, he instinctively headed towards Great Western Road, despite the fact that at rush hour on a Thursday morning it would be so busy that anyone could vanish instantly amid the traffic and crowd. Except it too was deserted. No cars in motion, no trucks rumbling, no people bustling, shouting, chatting. It was as if the world had been emptied in the night, save for himself. This was what an alien invasion was supposed to be like. Of course, it was just an impression caused by arriving at exactly the wrong moment, and it only lasted an instant or two. Then, as if a hidden switch were thrown, or all the world's traffic lights turned green, a butcher's shop door opened and a young mother emerged with a push chair, quickly followed by others from other shops, doorways and side streets, and two surges of traffic filled the empty road. In seconds the moment had passed, and the world, as far as Colin could tell, was as it always had been.

There was no doubt now that Paddy was gone.

When the first drops of rain arced out of the sky, Colin leaned against frontage of the newsagent and watched. There was something odd. He looked more closely. These drops, disobeying the usual dynamics of falling liquids, were perfect spheres. In fact they reminded him of nothing less than miniature versions of the glass marbles he had owned as a kid.

He held out a palm. The globes of rain landed in his hand, intact for an instant before bursting and seeping away. Cementing the likeness to marbles in his mind, was the writhing twist of life colouring the centre of each.

Colin wondered if anyone else in the world had noticed that the rain was amber, or if he were the only one touched by the invisible alien to be allowed to see them.

Mark Morris has given me directions of the quality you'd expect from a writer with a gift for evoking vivid locations from a few carefully chosen details. Even so, driving over the A659 is a nerve-racking experience, not least because the sharp bends I've been warned about are veiled in fog. I'm a little reassured when I spot Mark's key reference points – brewery delivery gates, grocery store – as I come into the town, but when I park there's something wrong. The house numbers are out of sequence and there's no one to verify that I'm on the right road. And yet, this ought to be a busy thoroughfare. For a moment I wonder if I've stumbled into one of the strange, sequestered small communities of Mark Morris's dark stories.

Finding a robust but appealing stone-built house – a testament to early Victorian design, craft and optimism – with the right number, I knock on the door and recognise the guy who answers the door from photographs on the Internet. I'm relieved to find I've arrived at the home Mark shares with his wife, the artist Nel Whatmore, and their children David and Polly.

MARK MORRIS INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW HEDGECOCK

AMBIGUITIES AND HAUNTINGS

After my fleeting but mildly alarming sense of displacement, I'm keen to discover the provenance of Morris's fascination with the sense of strangeness and threat evoked by isolated rural and semi-rural communities:

"It probably comes from the fact that I'm a big *Dr Who* fan: it was something I grew up with – the first thing that frightened me and fired my imagination. The first serious stuff I wrote was a set of *Dr Who* stories when I was twelve. I wrote them in ring-binder notepads and I've still got them somewhere. Episodes of *Dr Who* were often set in an isolated base or small community under siege. I like the idea of a place being closed off: when something happens within that small boundary there's no way for the inhabitants to tell the outside world. It's a classical horror scenario."

The exploits of the much-missed Time Lord weren't the only factor in the development of this recurring motif: formative experiences and memories of a more direct nature have played a part too. Morris was born in Bolsover, a small mining town in Derbyshire, and later lived in a rural community near Huddersfield. "We often used to ride our bikes to a nearby wood and spend the whole day in there mucking about. Since then I've always found woodland and fields very evocative. Maybe it's the way dark woodland cuts out the natural light – and the fact that there is less artificial light in the countryside. And there are other places that fire my imagination: I like writing about beaches, seaside towns and old pubs."

But there's more to Morris's dark fiction – in all its varied forms – than the evocation of light, atmosphere and isolation: its real chill factor lies in the traumas, frightening discoveries and unsettling revelations undergone by his characters. And one of its abiding concerns is the dynamics of closed groups and their relationship to outsiders.

"Where Graham Joyce is mainly concerned with the dynamics of families and other established groups [see interview in TTA28], I tend to write about lonely characters who are entering those groups – trying to worm their way in and find out what's going on. Who is good? Who can I trust? Does person

X like me? What is person Y's agenda? Characters and readers have to find out as the novel progresses. The process of throwing a character into a group of people they don't know is just fascinating."

Like his interest in secluded settings, the ease with which Morris adopts an outsider's perspective seems to have been informed by early experience. "My family moved around a lot: we lived in Bolsover; went to Hong Kong when I was five and came back when I was nine. Which was a strange experience: everything seemed cosy and familiar but – at the same time – very alien. Then we went to Newark and Huddersfield. I went to lots of different schools and had to make friends with people who were already established in their own cliques. I still like my own company – I'm happy to go to conventions and football matches on my own."

Morris's childhood may have been peripatetic but it wasn't unhappy. And yet, throughout his fiction, there's a clear fascination with the experience of trauma in early life. In *The Immaculate*, his third novel, first published in 1992, a successful writer returns to his the rural community of his childhood sixteen years after running away to London. His father, who blamed him for the death of his mother in childbirth and treated him badly, has just died. The old school bully is running the local boozer and the writer wonders whether their passage to adulthood precludes the possibility of further persecution. I ask Morris what is at the root of this interest in the insidious influence of the ordeals of childhood: "It's similar to the preference of actors for playing the villain: that kind of individual is just more interesting to play or write. Damaged characters give me far more scope for interesting relationships and discoveries, but what really intrigues me is the way the past comes forward to impact upon – and haunt – the present."

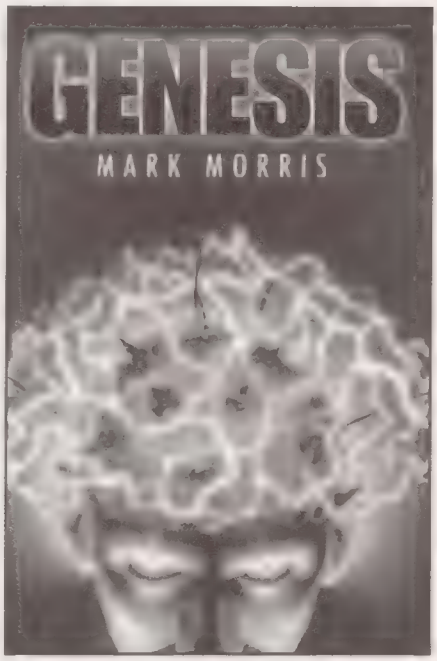
Mark Morris is best known as a horror writer, but his work also encompasses dark fantasy and SF. His latest novel, *Fiddleback*, is being marketed as a psychological thriller, but Morris prefers to think of it as a 'strange mainstream novel'. But, whatever genre he is working in, his books are characterised by compelling renditions of real danger and imagined menace: they have an intense and concentrated narrative power which, at its most effective, achieves the directness of myth.

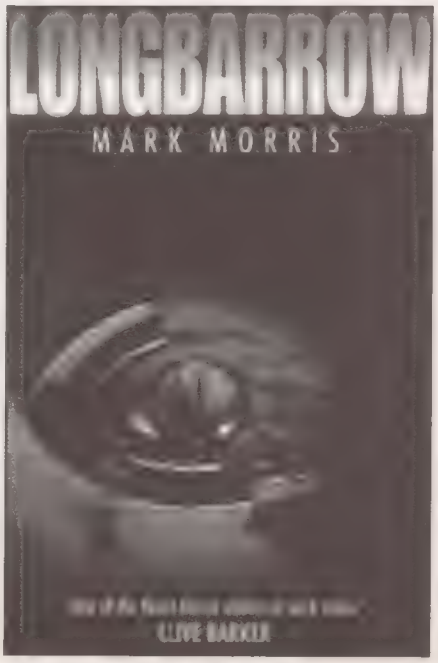
Morris's determination to become a full-time writer seems to have been fuelled by a cocktail of desperation and determination. Graduating from All Saints and Trinity College with a degree in History and Public Media in 1984 with no job and no firm idea of what he wanted to do, he signed on and wrote a novel, *The Winter Tree*, in his bedsit. "I used to love writing at school: I wrote novels in ring binder notepads and used to write incredibly long stories in English. So at the age of 22 I started writing for fun and after 18 months or so I found out about markets for genre fiction. I was due to go on a weekend residential course for horror fiction – in Ipswich I think – which was going to be run by Ramsey Campbell. I'd heard of Ramsey through Stephen King's book *Dance Macabre*: there was a section about him and little excerpts from his stories. I remember reading it and thinking, 'Wow, this guy is brilliant!' I'd never come across him before, but I managed to pick up secondhand copies of a couple of his books. Unfortunately there were only three applicants and the course was cancelled. But Ramsey got in touch and offered to look at our stories. I sent him a few, he was really enthusiastic and it went on from there. He suggested I went to the British Fantasy Convention where I would meet more editors and agents and writers. So I went to that and had a great time because I met people like Nicholas Royle and Graham Joyce."

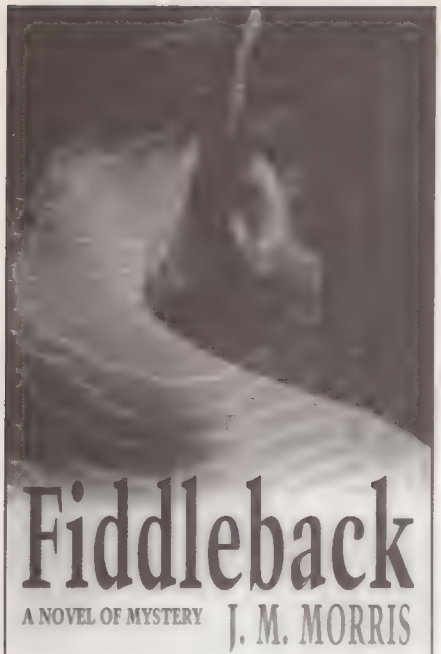
The Winter Tree was submitted to a dozen publishers and it was almost published by WH Allen under their Star Books imprint. Four companies told Morris the book showed promise without quite being the finished article, but said that they would like to see the next thing he wrote. One of the four, Piatkus, liked what they read and Morris's next book, *Toady* (aka *The Horror Club*), described by the author as 'a very overtly obvious horror novel', was published in 1989. The story concerns a group of kids who invoke an evil force after a séance.

If that sounds easy, it wasn't. Morris had to mine his reserves of self-belief and grim determination to maintain his status as a writer and buy the time he needed to develop his craft. And the other factor in sustaining Morris's commitment to his writing was a sensibility nurtured by the key cultural phenomenon of the late 1970s: punk. "I was a punk – it was the first music that grabbed me, the first subculture that was *mine*. I was 14 and I was blown away by 'Peaches' by The Stranglers and the Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant'. I had a studded leather jacket and dyed black hair. And there's part of the punk outlook that persists in me – a shiver still runs through my body whenever I hear 'God Save the Queen'. And I still have this idea that you shouldn't listen to people who say you can't do this, you can't do that – you should just get on with it. That helped me when I was called in for a restart interview by the DSS. At that point I'd been on the dole for a couple of years: I'd finished *The Winter Tree*, written loads of short stories and was halfway through *Toady*. I took lots of letters and manuscripts in, but the guy who interviewed me, a sixty-something managerial type, told me it was a pipe dream. He said, 'You're flogging a dead horse there mate, you want to get a job in Allders in Leeds and work your way up.' That made me even more determined to be a writer."

Morris's second published novel, *Stitch* (1991) – a story of cults, dark sexuality and demonic influence – is set on a university







FIDDLEBACK
JM Morris

Macmillan hb, 328pp, £10 • OUT NOW

'. . . how do you describe that moment when the lights go out in someone's eyes and the darkness takes over? They become something you can't reason with, something whose conscience you can't appeal to . . . They look human, but they are not. Not in the sense that the majority of us understand, anyway. They have no moral code. They become less than human – inadequate, incomplete. And that incompleteness can make them dangerous, even deadly.'

When Ruth Gemmil's younger brother Alex fails to return her calls, she sets off to check up on him. Unable to find him in Greenwell, the town where he has been living and teaching, she begins her tentative enquiries. Why is the town so dark and lonely? And who is the 'grey man' the schoolchildren saw Alex with not long before he went missing?

As Ruth becomes concerned that something terrible has happened to her brother, events escalate mysteriously, dangerously out of control. Then in one fearful moment she is sure she glimpses the abusive ex-boyfriend she left behind in London, the man who caused her years of torturous pain.

'Eerie, assured and utterly compelling, this is a novel you will not forget' **Michael Marshall Smith**

campus, based on Trinity and All Saints College, in the middle of nowhere. Crammed with nasty set pieces, the book demonstrates that sedulous research needs to be transmuted by the alchemy of hard craft and invention if a story is to live in the reader's imagination. "I did a lot of reading on serial killers for *Stitch* and almost every single case involved someone being abused or suffering some kind of disturbance as a child: the well established notion of endless cycles of brutality. And there was plenty of evidence for the idea that specific psychological trauma can trigger spectacular violence: the Yorkshire Ripper was ridiculed by a prostitute in a pub – in front of his whole family – and everyone laughed at him. But if I transcribed these case studies and incidents directly into a novel, they would strike people as a bit cliched and corny. The trick is to get beyond the cliche: I want this research-based material to get in my books, but I have to make it real for the reader at the same time."

With the writing in 1992 of *The Immaculate* – Morris's tale of sinister memories and a writer's return to his rural roots – came a determination to take more risks and to explore the boundaries of the horror genre. But his publisher showed less enthusiasm for challenging audience expectations. "It's a fairly gentle ghost story, but people were throwing their hands in the air and saying, 'Oh no, you can't do this – there are 50 pages before anything supernatural happens. Your typical horror reader won't be interested in all these pages dealing with characterisation and relationships!' I'm not sure who the 'typical horror reader' might be. It's a notion that makes me think of the two guys in *The League of Gentlemen* who go into the video shop and say, 'Seen that; seen that; seen that; don't like that – it hasn't got many killings in it.' The problem is that there's a widely held view that horror novels ought to consist of one set piece after another or, at least, that each episode should end with something gory or creepy happening."

The Secret of Anatomy (1994), described by Clive Barker as 'an apocalyptic journey into dark and forbidden territory', is another story concerned with the way the dead hand of the past can steer events in the present. The book centres on the discovery, by a man experiencing a mid-life crisis, of a disturbing message in a bottle written many years earlier. Brought out in paperback by HarperCollins, the book found an appreciative and sizeable audience. Its success meant the publishing giant was keen to pick up Morris's next book, but they were disappointed when the author produced *Mr Bad Face* (1996), a novel that didn't fit the standard horror or supernatural templates. Morris's determination to push the boundaries of popular fiction genres hasn't made him precious about his craft. He reflects frankly on the creative process and is a tough critic of his own work. "I wrote a psycho-thriller – and that's not what they were looking for. And they weren't happy about the fact that the story is ambiguously supernatural: it has a central conceit some readers think is a fantastic twist; others feel cheated. I've never been sure – I can see both viewpoints – but HarperCollins were saying, 'Couldn't you introduce a genuine supernatural element? An evil talisman or something?' But I couldn't – it was impossible. Piatkus really fought my corner over *Mr Bad Face*, bringing it out in hardback *and* paperback. And, after that I wrote *Longbarrow* (1997) almost as a 'thank you' to Piatkus – it was the sort of multi-viewpoint, set piece supernatural story they were looking for. Looking back, I like elements of the book but I'm not sure the whole thing stands up very well."

Whatever doubts the author entertains about *Longbarrow*, it's an object lesson in the imaginative transformation of well-worn stories into something entirely new and an absorbing exploration of the folklore traditions of Britain. Morris reveals a fascination with curious local festivals, regional folklore and the traces of pagan religion that can still be found all over the country. "I love Britain for the fact that it is so ancient: I wanted to do something mystical, touching upon its history of witchcraft and encompassing lots of traditional stories from disparate sources. I drew on the legend of the Seven Sleepers; Black Shuck the demon dog, who appears in the lanes and alleys of several counties; and the recurring tale of the man who looks through the keyhole of the church door and sees the devil walking down the aisle. I wanted to incorporate all these diverse tales, symbols and evocative images. One night, Nel and I were driving to Boston Spa, where we were living at the time. It's comparatively rural, and I happened to remark that we hadn't seen a fox since we moved from Leeds, where there were plenty of the urban variety. Suddenly, and literally just as I said it, a fox ran in front of the car and turned to look at us – its eyes flashing in the glare of the headlights – then ran off. And I thought, 'That's the sense of ancient, unearthly force that I want to capture in *Longbarrow*.'"

So does Morris's interest in myth, folklore and the supernatural imply a genuine sense of the numinous or personal experience of the supernatural? "I love the traditions and stories and I love going to burial mounds and stone circles, partly because the modern world of supermarkets and shopping malls doesn't interest me that much. I'd much rather breathe the air of aeons past. But it's a yearning for something other than the world we live in, rather than a belief that there is anything beyond our material existence. I've had various ambiguous experiences but, considering them rationally, I'm not convinced there is anything going on outside my own mind. I think I created them myself. And I would like to think there are ancient forces working away out there, that there are paranormal experiences, that there is life after death. I'd love to believe

there's a great design to everything – it must be a comfort to those who can believe – but I need some sort of evidence."

In the late 1990s Morris got back to his storytelling roots when he was commissioned to write two original *Dr Who* stories when the BBC launched a new series of novels. *The Bodysnatchers* (1997) – set in Victorian England – featured the Doctor in his eighth life (as played by Paul McGann); while *Deep Blue* (1999) was a 'Past Doctors' story set in the lifespan of the fifth Doctor (as played by Peter Davison). I ask Morris if the publishers gave him free reign with the *Dr Who* concept, and how he went about creating stories for a character who had had such a profound influence on his development as a writer. "They weren't at all precious and I had plenty of scope to do what I liked with the narratives. Having said that, I don't think I could write a Paul McGann book now that the fan writers have come in and established their own history for the latest Doctor. I wrote the third book soon after the TV movie had been shown, so it was all pretty fresh and new. But now you'd have to read every single book to know what's going on!"

Morris set out to recapture the frisson of fear elicited for him by the Autons smashing through shop windows and stalking the streets, and the Cybermen throwing open manhole covers and swarming out of the London Underground. "It was so scary and atmospheric – the catalyst that led me to the Pan and Fontana ghost and horror anthologies – and eventually on to the classics of the supernatural by the likes of MR James, Wells, Poe, Lovecraft and Robert Aickman. I wanted to recapture some of that by doing atmospheric and frightening stories for an adult readership. I'd read some of the *Dr Who* novels and felt they'd moved too far from the original premise into a cliquey universe: a universe so self-referential that only dedicated fans could make head or tail of it. I tried to get away from all that and the reaction has been very mixed. Some people were outraged that I came in – having written other kinds of fiction – and did these books: there were some resentful and vitriolic reviews. Other people have praised them to the skies and they did well in the *Dr Who Magazine* readers' poll. But, much as I love the series, I don't want to get involved in the strange ghetto of fan culture and conventions. It's all a bit stifling and scary."

Fiddleback, published in March 2002 under the name JM Morris, is a 'missing person' narrative, containing many of the elements that have come to define Morris's stories – damaged lives, real and imagined horror, sinister small communities and the past haunting the present. But, as the author explains, it marks a significant development in his work. "When I set out to write *Fiddleback* I was moving slowly away from the supernatural elements of horror fiction, because I felt I'd exhausted most of what I what I wanted to write about there. And to write about people and the darkness they inhabit rather than the supernatural."

Morris had written *Genesis* (1999), which he describes as 'a pseudo-SF, *X-Files* type book' at a time when horror was slipping in the marketplace. He then had the idea for *Fiddleback* and wrote a longish synopsis for it. The parlous stake of horror publishing meant it came as no surprise when his regular publisher Piatkus didn't buy the book. Morris's agent then suggested he should write the book before trying to sell it. So, for fifteen months he wrote with no money coming in. "I didn't think of it as a psychological thriller or a horror novel while I was writing it, I thought of it as a strange mainstream novel. The original version had some strange elements that I toned down later on: it became quite fantastical towards the end and had a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* feel to it. There was a scene where a character hides in a cupboard and is pursued down a rabbit hole corridor that suddenly opens up. The published version is more or less the same story, but I decided to give it a sense of slightly warped reality rather than hyperreality."

Morris was surprised when the book was bought by Macmillan and marketed as a psychological thriller. "But part of me thought 'if psychological thrillers can be like this I've got more scope than the horror genre gave me.' The switch to a new genre wasn't a conscious thing, just a natural progression. I expected it to be marketed as my next horror novel."

Another interesting departure for Morris is that *Fiddleback* is written from a first person female point of view: always a risky undertaking for a male writer, but in this case the stakes are raised because one of the key themes is sexual violence. I ask if this aspect of the book influenced the decision to publish under the gender-neutral name JM Morris. "Yes, it was my agent's suggestion. I've been asked if the change of name represented an attempt to get away from my association with the horror genre. That was a consideration, but we were more concerned with the fact that some female readers might take offence that a male author has written this kind of narrative from a female perspective. So far I've had a positive reaction from female readers when they've discovered the author is male. Some of them wonder how I've managed to capture the vulnerability that a woman feels in the face of this kind of violence, but it's just been a case of keeping my eyes and ears open. It's about the kind of violence that can erupt in people's lives suddenly and unexpectedly at any moment."

The novel is every bit as unsettling as Morris suggests. One of his finest achievements is the book's utterly convincing portrayal of a character beset by obsessions – little things that wouldn't bother other people but which offend him trigger outbreaks of spectacular rage. "I want people to be as disturbed as possible by the violence in the book: we all go through life thinking violence and death are things that happen to others. I wanted to shock my readers into a sense of vulnerability, so I was particularly pleased with the way that character develops and the way people are reacting to him."

Having covered Morris's latest novel we set out for an Italian restaurant which, I'm told, would have afforded me a fine view if the fog weren't thickening. After discussing the merits of Leeds United past and present – Morris has been a supporter for thirty years – we move on to his plans for the future. "The next book, *Nowhere Near an Angel*, will be set in London with lots of scenes in sweaty clubs and bedsits – so the atmosphere will be claustrophobic. The story will be told from a first person, male viewpoint. It's going to move between two time zones, with the past impacting on the present once again. Part of it takes place in 1977 – when he's 17 or 18 – and part is set in the present day. It's about a man who has lost a bit of his life due to something that happened to him in the punk era, something that's coming back to haunt him. It won't be all that linear, so it's a book I'll have to plan out carefully."

In addition, the author has been writing a few things under the Mark Morris name: short stories and a couple of novellas for Pete Crowther. *The Ugly Men*, published by PS Publishing later this year, is another story with slightly ambiguous supernatural elements. "Once again, I didn't really know what I was writing. I just had the idea and Pete has decided it's a modern-day adventure story. It's about a 32-year-old guy from a small rural village who moves to London and works in a bookshop. His father commits suicide, which comes as no surprise because there's a history of introspection and depression. But he soon discovers that something that happened in his father's past has now come back to haunt them. Then there are strange phone calls, and he starts to think he sees his father in various locations. I can't say more than that without giving the whole thing away."

Over a leisurely coffee – we're in no hurry to rush out into the thickening fog – we share enthusiasm for: the films of Michael Reeves (*The Sorcerers*, *Witchfinder General*); portmanteau horror films (*From Beyond the Grave*, *Asylum*); British gangster movies (*Get Carter*, *The Long Good Friday*, *Brighton Rock*); Christmas adaptations of MR James classics; the exquisite horror of Robert Aickman's *Ringing the Changes*; and – last but not least – ITV's *Appointment with Fear* movie slot on Friday Nights in the early '70s. "That was when I was about 10 or 11 years old. I was completely traumatised by the first few I saw: I remember sitting on the settee rigid with terror and afraid of going to bed." ■

Forgetting the Umbrella

I'm walking through downtown Portland, strolling past the coffee shops and gas stations, and trying to remember the video collage my son made for me. Noah is four years old and he already knows how to splice together the programs and commercials.

How did it go? Mighty Mouse inhaled a flower up his nose, Elmo talked to a fish, and then – I can't remember. Was it a news report about global warming? An advertisement for Anacin?

Dots appear on the concrete, dark circles and splotches. I look up and the water bounces off my face, lightly falling in my eyes, making me blink.

I look at my hands, at the cane I'm holding, at the thin folds of nylon sheets that are wrapped around this cane, and I pause.

It's raining. Mighty Mouse inhaled a flower up his nose . . .

On instinct I bring the cane up, over my head, pointing the tip towards the sky, and I fold out the sheets, pushing so that the silver spokes spring out and a circular canopy is formed. I open my umbrella and worry at myself, worry at how distracted I'm becoming, at what it's possible for me to forget.

In the last few months I've temporarily forgotten:

1. Bicycles
2. Chewing Gum
3. Light Switches

and now,

4. Umbrellas

I close the umbrella and push open the doors of the 7–Eleven. I look at the Slurpee Machine, recognize it immediately. I pick up a copy of Newsweek, of Time Magazine. I grab a Hershey's bar and some pop rocks. It's all perfectly normal, immediately recognizable, and I start to feel better.

I approach the counter, deciding to purchase the candy bar and the Newsweek, and put my umbrella down, hanging it on the counter by its handle.

The Pilsbury Doughboy? David Letterman? Mr Rogers? The logo for AT&T?

I take my merchandise after watching the receipt get folded and stuffed into the paper bag, and start towards the exit, but have to turn back.

I've forgotten my umbrella again.

My Life in the Spectacle

When you take into account what I do for a living it's not very surprising that my son, even at the age of four, should know how to use the television, how to create with it rather than just watching passively. In fact, I'd be a little disappointed if Noah wasn't interested in television.

I do design work for Leyden and Kennedy. Ever heard of us? We're the ones who put William S Burroughs in sneakers, the agency who equated a sports car with punk rock, the ones who made Miller beer seem hip because it *wasn't* a microbrew, cool because it tasted bad.

And before you ask, let me tell you:

I don't feel guilty about what I do.

A well made pair of shoes, an ice cold beer (even if it tastes bad), a revolutionary car, these things are – well, they exist; life is full of commodities, and rather than deny their legitimacy and cut myself off from the ebb and flow of the modern world, I try to find what is beautiful, or at least interesting, amongst the scramble of our junk culture.

It's an art, it really is.

It's what I'm good at.

S is for Spaceman

My wife and son are sitting at the kitchen table and reading through the Dr Seuss book of A, B, C's when I get home from work. She's got him spitting through straws, working on pronouncing the letter 'S', but he's not really paying attention. It's all just what they were told to do, neither of them are particularly happy with the arrangement, and before I can even say hello, let alone sit down and unwind, Noah is after me for a distraction.

"Make the spaceman talk, Papa."

Only, I'm sure what he really says is something like, "Ake da thaceman tah, papa," but that's not what I hear. I have to focus, have to really try, in order to hear his speech impediment.

Noah wants me to make the spaceman talk. I tell him that it's too late for playing, for pretend games, but my words don't register; he just keeps shoving his stuffed spaceman at me, this toy that's not really an astronaut at all, but a worker garbed in a radiation suit, a failed experiment from the Pentium campaign.

"He hasn't seen you all day," my wife reminds me.

"Make the spaceman talk, Papa. Please?"

"Okay, but just for a minute."

"Just for five minutes?" Noah asks.

"Hi there, Noah. I'm Mr Spaceman! What do you want to talk about?"

THE SUBLIMINAL SON

"Tell me about your spaceship!"

"It's called a rocket! And I have to strap myself in and wear a spacesuit when I'm inside it. Then we have a countdown. Can you help me countdown to blast-off?"

"Ten, nine, seven, four, three, five, two, one, blast-off!"

"Whoa! I'm going to the moon!"

"Mr Spaceman?"

"Yes?"

"Where are you from? Where do you live all the time? In your spaceship?"

"Astronauts are from Earth, just like little boys are from Earth."

"No. I'm talking to the Spaceman!"

"Sorry." I correct myself. "Spacemen are from Earth but they explore the whole Universe in their spaceships."

"What's the Universe?"

"The Universe is everything there is – all of space, all of the planets, everything and everybody."

"I've been to the Universe."

"Well, the Universe is everything so . . . "

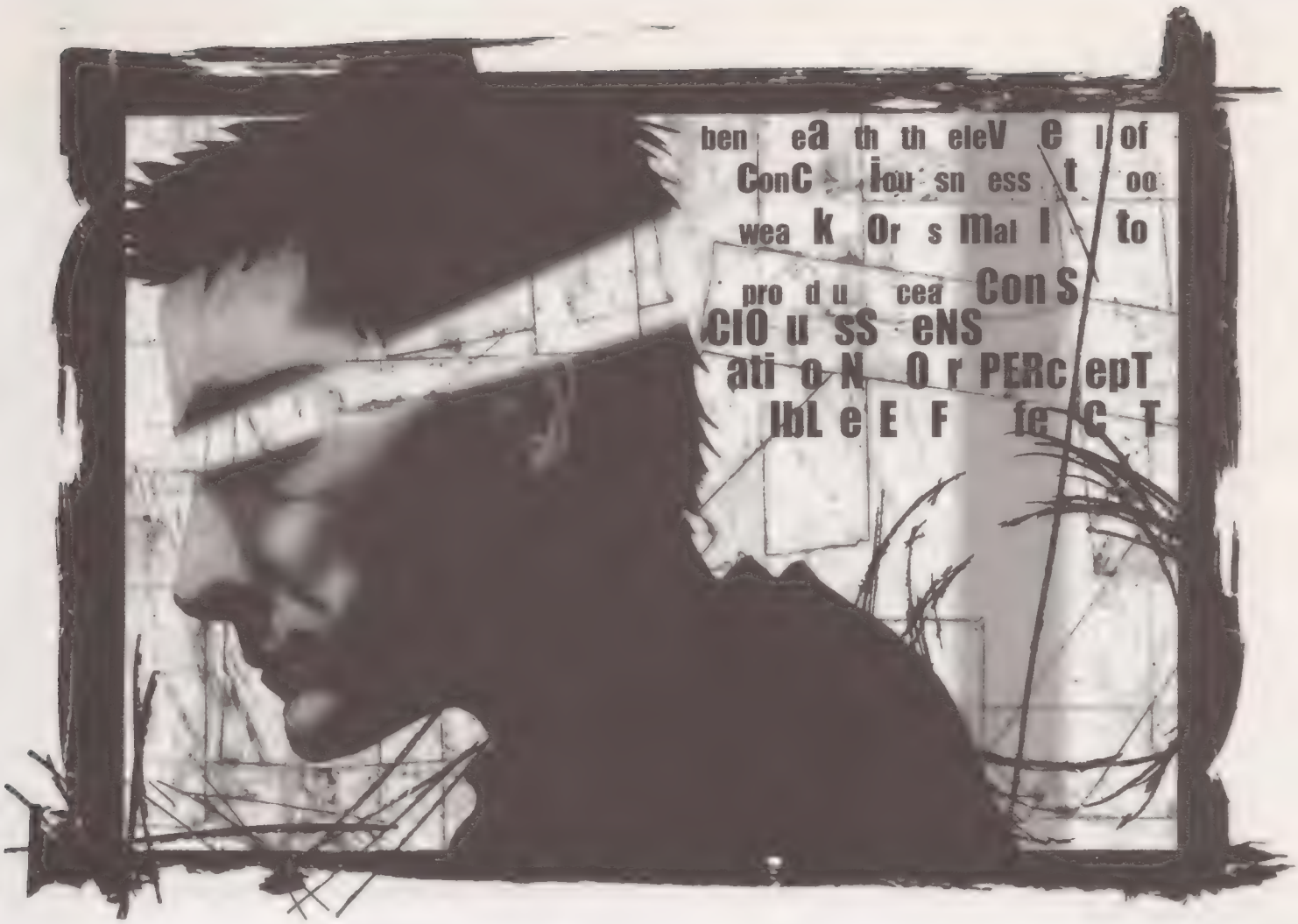
"I've been to space too. I've been to the Universe and space."

"You have a rocket? You're a spaceman too?"

"No. I just went there by myself. I went there when I was sleeping."

"You had a dream about being a spaceman?"

"No. Not a dream. I went there. I went to space."



DOUGLAS LAIN

(HELVETICA 48)

"Wow! That's incredible!"

"Yeah. I went to space by myself. I go to space by myself every night."

"That's great!"

"Yeah!"

"Okay, I've made the spaceman talk for you. Now it's bedtime."

"But . . . "

"I'm sorry, but it's time for brushing teeth and bed."

"But, just five minutes."

"It's been long enough."

"Oh! Why don't you pay attention?"

The Speech Therapist

My wife is clutching at the formica table top and gritting her teeth. "Isn't there another way we could do this?"

"I hope so. There has been no progress going about it this way, has there? I mean, does your son want to speak clearly? As far as I can tell, he doesn't seem to see the need for it," Ms Dendose tells us. She is fiddling with the polyester rose on her lapel and talking about my son like he isn't there.

"You've just got to get to know him – he takes his time warming up to people," I say. "Noah, you want to talk right, don't you? You want to speak so people can understand, don't you?" I ask him.

"Papa!" Noah yelps. He slouches forward in his seat, and kicks the table leg.

I glance down at the workbook, at the way the letters look on the cover. The Institute of Neuropsychiatry chose to print their material in Helvetica.

Helvetica is very popular, it is the most commonly used font for signs, maps, brochures, and all sorts of product labels; popular not because it's the easiest to read, but because it has almost no pre-industrial connotations. This is the lettering of the computer age, it is a font that conveys an up to the minute quality.

"I can't understand your son, what he says, and I'm a professional. His speech problems are really very severe," Ms Dendose tells us.

"You can't understand him at all?" I ask.

She goes on twirling her dress, tugging on its ornaments. "No, at least not very much; I can make out only a few words: hello, mama, papa. That kind of thing. You may claim that he has a vast vocabulary but I can't distinguish even a trace of it."

Noah must be sick of everyone talking around him, ignoring him, because he flops off his chair and crawls across the floor on his belly, scoots to the play corner like a soldier in a fire storm. He picks through the alphabet blocks; slamming them against the wall with solid, overhanded, throws.

"Noah! Stop that! Come back over here," I yell at him.

"Oh, hell. Let him do it," my wife mutters.

"Do they even try to do the worksheets? Are they working on this at all?" Ms Dendose asks me.

"I don't know." I turn to my wife, try to get her to meet my eye.

"Yes. We've tried the worksheets," she says.

"They've tried the worksheets."

"Have you tried them?"

"Me?"

"With your son."

"Oh, no I haven't."

"Maybe, if your wife will agree, maybe *you* could do the worksheets with him." Ms Dendose is practically strangling her polyester rose, nearly tearing it from her chest.

The Mummy

Worksheet number two is nothing more than a series of 'S' words and iconic cartoons of mostly unrelated objects: a sand castle, a saw, a sailboat, the sun, soup, seven, suit, sofa, soda . . .

This problem runs in the family; I had a speech impediment myself, when I was his age, I couldn't say 'salt' or 'sink' or 'somnolent'. My father was the same way. When he was a very little boy my father smiled at his schoolteacher mom and marine dad from across the dinner table, tilted his head to one side, opened his eyes wide, and said, "The thick o'clock whiffle! I hear the thick o'clock whiffle."

With my dad the solution had been to beat the tendency out of him, but I went to a speech therapist. I went to a speech therapist as a child and I'm going to keep taking my son to a therapist, despite my wife's objections. Ms Dendose is at the top of her field; this is in Noah's best interest.

"Say 'soap'," I tell him.

"No."

"Are you tired?"

"I don't want to say 'soap'."

"Maybe it's getting to be bedtime."

"No. Tell me about the mummy again."

"If you don't want to do the worksheet then it's bedtime."

"Just one question. One more question."

"What is it? What do you want to know?"

"There aren't really mummies. Mummies are just pretend. Right?"

"There are some mummies. Not many, but a few. There are real mummies."

"Oh. But, this is a pretend mummy, a toy mummy." He holds up the rubbery toy, a trinket he got out of a HappyMeal box, and bounces it up and down, making swooshing and airplane noises as he moves the wobbly creature in front of his eyes.

"Put the mummy away."

"It's not a real monster," Noah says. He pauses. "I thought monsters were just pretend."

"Mummies are dead bodies that were wrapped up in bandages a long time ago, bodies that were preserved by being wrapped up tight," I tell him. "Now, put the straw back in your mouth and say 'salt'."

"Are we going to be wrapped in bandages after we're dead?"

"Noah!"

"Please. One more question."

"People don't wrap up dead bodies anymore. You get buried or cremated." I take the mummy out of his hands, plop it down on the other side of the table, and push the worksheet in front of him. "Repeat after me. 'Shingle'."

"What's cremated mean?"

"Cremated means burned up, set on fire . . . "

"Shingle." Noah says it perfectly. "Why did people make mummies a long time ago?"

"Good."

"Why, Papa?"

"They thought that dead people still needed their bodies, that dead people would come back to life later on and that they would need their bodies."

"That's silly."

"Well, that's what people thought. That's what their religion told them."

"What's our religion?"

"Our religion?"

"Is it just pretend?"

"I don't know. I guess most people think there is a spirit in the body, and that it doesn't need the body. That it can live without the body."

"With Jesus?"

"Right, with Jesus or Buddha or Mohammed. But without a body."

"Are spirits pretend, Papa?"

"Most people believe in them."

"Make the mummy talk."

"We've got to do this, Noah. We've got to finish the worksheet."

"Please?"

"No. I don't want to make the mummy talk."

"Cause it's dead. You don't want to make the mummy talk because spirits are just pretend."

"I don't want to make the mummy talk because it's time for working."

"Papa, are the people in your head dead or alive? Are they real or pretend?"

"I – what do you mean?"

"They must be alive because dead people don't talk. That's silly."

"Okay forget the worksheet. It's bedtime, Noah. Go brush your teeth."

"But, we're just pretending."

"Well, I don't want to pretend."

"We're just pretending about the mummy. It's just pretend."

Shadow Collage

My wife has the bowl of popcorn, lightly sprinkled with brewer's yeast, but she isn't watching the movie anymore. She can't follow it, isn't interested. I can't keep my eyes off the television screen.

We'd popped in the video cassette thinking it was the director's cut of *Brazil*, something we've both seen before, but about half way through, right after Santa visits the hero in his jail cell, the movie cut out and we were confronted by our son's artwork, his most recent collage.

"Rhyme rungry!" Scooby says.

"Can't get enough cookie."

"It's because I've lost track of my shadow," the little bear says. "Can you help me find it?"

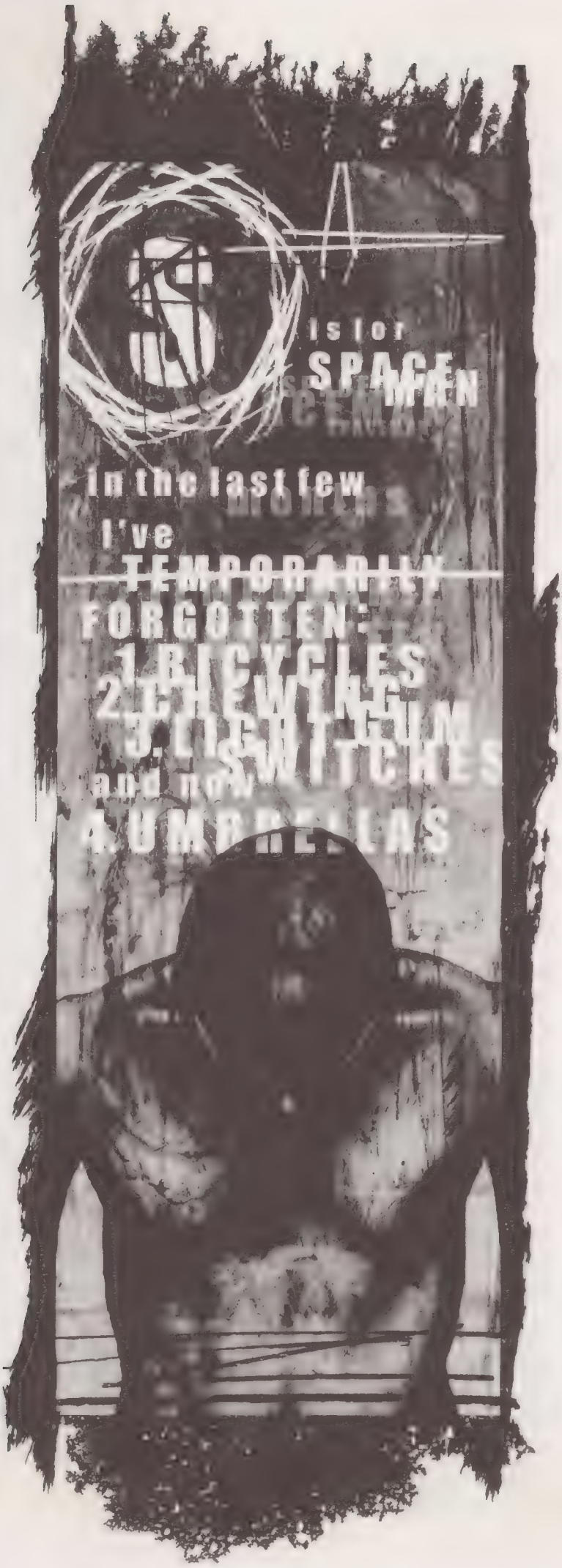
It's riveting somehow, confusing but in an interesting way. I wonder if this technique, this sort of found video project, might be put to use for Leyden and Kennedy. Would it be possible to sneak in a product between the cuts?

Probably not. How could I use this technique to sell if what it does is make the viewer forget?

I close my eyes and try to block out my son's images. I say it aloud: "These collages are making me forget."

"What?" my wife asks. She's reading Mothering Magazine, and picking through the popcorn for the juicy, buttery, yeasty bits.

"These collages . . . " I start, but then the screen catches me again.



I watch as Superman flies, faster than a speeding bullet, to the children's hospital. He lands, swooping through an open window on the top floor, and a nurse, seemingly unimpressed by his entrance, hands the superhero a weeping infant.

Superman looks down at the weeping infant, uses his x-ray vision and looks at the boy's bones, at the boy's insides, and finds the problem – the alien particle.

"I've found it," Superman says.

"We have to get it out of him."

"Rhyme right behind rooo!" Scooby screeches, his legs blurring as he stands perfectly still.

"Wonder Woman, it's you. Maybe you can help Superman figure this out!" the nurse says.

"Cookie! Cookie! Cookie!"

By Design

If I hadn't gone into advertising I might have tried urban planning. Riding the light rail through downtown I study all the good work that has already been done. Our institutions blur together here – a Starbuck's, the public library, a cinema complex, a skyscraper full of offices – all of it looks and works in the same way: like a kindergarten classroom, full of simple labels and safe corners. And the light rail itself, the Max Train, this is Portland at its best. Clean and above ground, lit with sunshine, the Max gives a sense that the mechanism behind our city is running smoothly. Life is benign.

I'm scanning it all, feeling warm about everything, and so the interruption, the glitch, takes me by surprise.

The walls of the train, right above the plate glass windows, are lined with cryptographs and hieroglyphics; strange charts and photos are all around me, above my head. I can't make out any of it.

IF YOU DON'T COME SEE ME TODAY the sign reads I CAN'T SAVE YOU ANY MONEY.

What does that mean?

WANT INSTANT CASH? GET AN INSTANT JOB WITH INSTANT LABOR, INC another sign reads, and it's strange how strange it seems, how confused I am looking at it.

I designed some of these signs, most of them. This is my own work I'm befuddled by, my livelihood that I've temporarily forgotten.

By the time I arrive at work I feel clumsy; everything is helter skelter. I stumble to my cubicle, and I can't quite get started on anything. Everything keeps going wrong. For instance, the new thumbtacks won't hold, they keep slipping out of the cubicle wall, and my weekly schedule glides, back and forth on the air conditioned currents, to the carpeting. I pick up the stapler and try to figure out what it does, what it's for. And what does the word Swingline mean?

Elmo's fish, Mr Rogers, the Insurance of Mutual of Omaha . . .

When I was his age, Noah's age, I went to preschool.

I used to wet my pants regularly because I was afraid to ask for anything, to ask if I could go to the bathroom; this didn't make me popular with the other kids, and the teacher didn't like me because when she took us swimming, to the YMCA, I wouldn't get in the pool. I convinced two other children, a freckled boy with red hair and his twin sister, to join me. We would not get in the pool. I said there were bodies; I was hysterical because I thought I could see all the bodies of the kids who drowned, or the kids who were going to drown.

I bang my knee against my desk. I'm still clumsy, but now the stapler doesn't seem so mysterious.

Work, I'm at work . . .

My part in this design project is to draw a cocktail glass. That's all I have to do, a simple cocktail glass, but the most I can come up with is a sketch – a doodle really. What these

people want from me is impossible. They want me to design something they've seen a hundred thousand times, but they want it to be something special. I'm supposed to turn the letters of the alphabet into alchemical symbols that everyone can recognize; I'm supposed to transform a cocktail glass into an artifact from the moon. This is my job, making the mundane seem magical, but I'm too distracted thinking about what it was like to pee my pants at the YMCA and I can't get started.

Didn't Freud claim that there is no such thing as an accident? I bang my knee against my desk. I slip and jab my index finger with a number two pencil.

One Employee to Another

I'm fiddling with a fanged Pacman-shaped device, crunching up paper with it and trying to figure out what it is, when my colleague interrupts.

"Do you have the glass?"

"The glass?" The pamphlet I pick up as a shield has a picture of a mountain range on each page, underneath there are boxes with numbers.

"Did you draw the cocktail glass?" Dan asks again.

It's a calendar. And that Pacman thingie I was playing with before is a staple remover.

"I haven't finished yet. Do you have the napkin?"

"Of course I have the napkin, otherwise would I be asking you for the glass?"

"I don't know, Dan. I guess not."

"When will you have the glass?"

"I don't know. How did you finish the napkin so soon? That looked like a difficult – more difficult than the glass. What they were asking . . . "

Is Cookie Monster hungry all the time because he needs something that he doesn't have or because he's denying something he has but doesn't want? Is Shaggy really a friend to Scooby, or is Shaggy dominating Scooby, oppressing the poor dog?

"I understand paper," Dan tells me.

"Paper?"

"That's what most napkins are made of, paper."

"Right. Well, I'm not done yet."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"No. I can't take the work home with me. I've got a family."

"I don't believe in families."

"Well they exist."

"I don't have a family."

"You do."

"No."

"Who raised you?"

"My father and mother."

"See, you do have a family."

"Ahhh – but they weren't like your parents. They weren't like your wife and child. They were helpful. They knew how important a napkin could be. They understood about paper."

"Did they?"

"They were practically paper people."

"You were raised by paper people?"

"That's right."

"I believe it."

"In fact, I've got my mother right here. In my side pocket. I keep her in an envelope."

"That must be very convenient."

"It is. Do you want to see her?"

"No thanks."

"She folds up very nicely."

"I'd imagine so."

"My father is made of cardboard. I keep him in the garage."

"That explains a lot."

"You think?"

"I'll need another day for this."

"Okay by me."

Dan just stands there, leaning against my cubicle, and I'm afraid for a moment that my whole shell will topple. I grab the top of the divider and frown at him, try to appear menacing.

"Give your mother my regards," I tell him.

Dan pulls on his tie, adjusts his jacket lapels, and leans in. "Maybe she could visit you, maybe I'll mail her to you."

"No. You can just tell her I said hello."

"Can I borrow a stamp?"

Beyond CSPAN

I didn't sleep well last night; I had too many dreams.

What I want now is to watch CSPAN or the Weather Channel; I want to use television to help me ease into consciousness, but my son is up already, and he's been editing. He wants me to watch another video collage and insists on showing me his television people.

I press PLAY on the remote and brace myself.

Fast, fast, fast relief. It's the real thing. Everyday people.

There is a shot of factories in Berlin puffing out soot and smoke, there are dancing penguins, and Molly Ringwald is huffing and puffing up the side of a dune, whining through a deserted futurescape. John Boy from *The Waltons* is arguing with a tentacled alien creature about whether there is enough water to go around, and a little boy with yellow pupils, glowing and flickering with computer generated effect, is singing the tootsie roll theme song and making a cereal bowl float across the kitchen table.

Hey Mikey!

Speech Therapy and the Word

Ms Dendose has Noah writing down the letters, drawing thin squiggle lines that are meant to inspire him to make the proper, matching, sound. A 'T' that looks more like an 'X' is supposed to impart the ability to say 'tah'. 'Tah', and 'tah', and 'tah'. 'T' and 'T' and 'T'.

"How is it going?" I ask. I'm about fifteen minutes early picking him up and Ms Dendose doesn't even look at me. "I don't want to interrupt. I'll just sit and watch."

"Noah, can you say 'cat'?"

"No."

"Noah, say 'cat' and say 'tah' at the end. Pronounce the 'T'," she instructs him.

"Tah, tah, tah, tah, tah, tah . . . "

"Good, but say 'cat'. Use the sound in a word."

"I'm not-tah going tah-oo," Noah says.

"Cat."

"Tah, tah, tah . . . "

"Cat."

He grabs a plexiglass box off the formica table, scoots his butt off his chair, lands with a thud on the wall to wall carpeting, and turns away from his lesson.

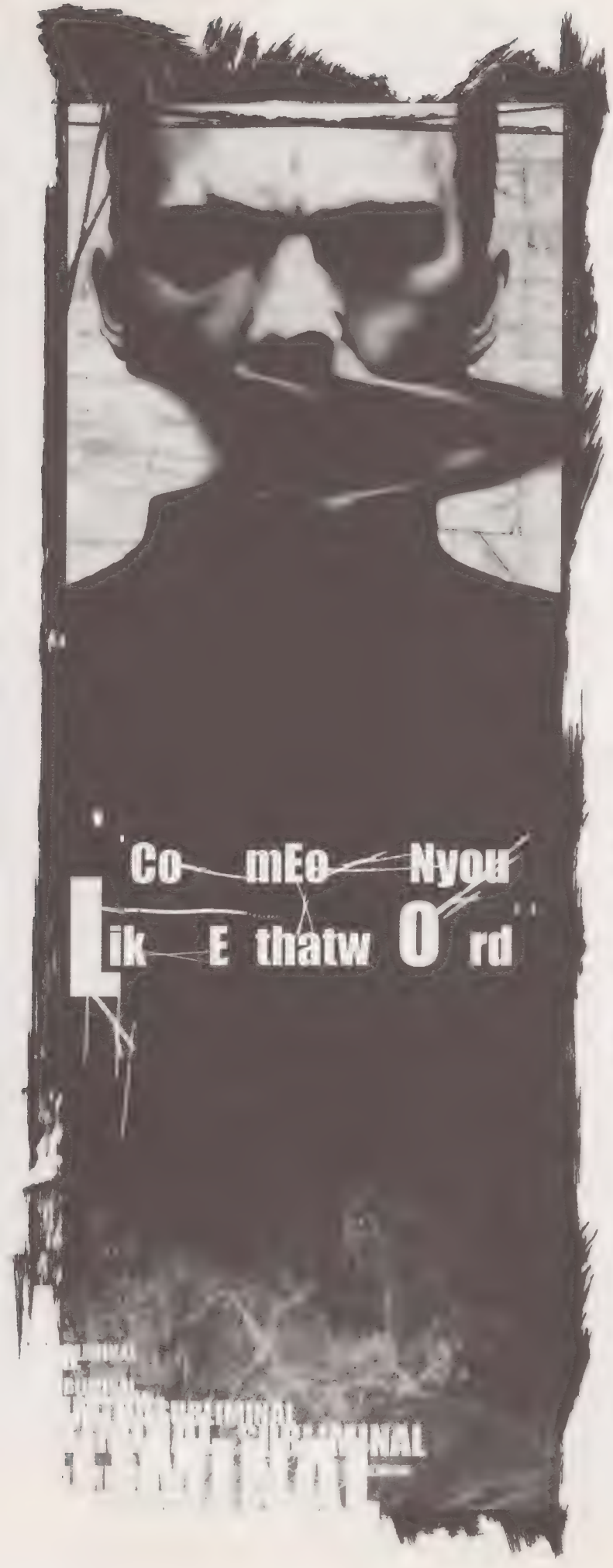
"Cat," Ms Dendose says.

Noah shakes the plexiglass box, makes a marble roll back and forth until it finds the hole and falls through to the next level, the next compartment in the box. He spins the green plastic dials, pushes his palm over the pink switches on the side, and moves the marble through the maze.

"Tough day?" I ask Ms Dendose.

"He won't cooperate. He doesn't want to learn."

Noah is staring at the bottom of the box, through the clear plastic and at the white marble. He tilts the box back and forth,



rattling the marble in its cage.

"He said 'tah', I heard him," I say. "That's good, right?"

"You have to stop coddling him. Have to make him see the importance of this."

"Okay."

She takes out a memo pad and a Bic pen from her purse and starts to scribble out some instructions, like she's writing a prescription.

Noah has the marble flowing up through the box now, rolling back and forth on the ceiling of each compartment – defying gravity. He is holding the plexiglass entirely still, staring hard into the maze, and the ball is falling up, finding the holes, the spinners and trapdoors, and running backwards to to the top.

"I want you to stop responding to him when he doesn't pronounce a word correctly. I want you to stop understanding him," she tells me.

"Did you see that?" I ask, and point at my son like he's an animal at the zoo. Noah has the marble all the way through the maze, and he's rattling it around with his mind in the uppermost box like a four year old Uri Geller.

"Listen to me. I want you to stop using sound when you talk to him. Just move your lips and tongue; speak silently and let him learn to make out what you're saying by watching the movements. I want him to *see* how to say the words right," she says.

"That's crazy," I say.

"It's a common technique," Ms Dendose says.

"How did you do that?" I ask. "Did you do that?"

"Tah," Noah says.

Without Speaking

"Papa, I want to watch *Toy Story*. Can we watch *Toy Story*?"

His mother doesn't like it, this new approach, but I'm determined to go through with it. He has to learn how to speak, how to communicate so that people will understand him. That's my job, as his father, teaching him the language of the public.

"Can you say, 'Story'?" I ask him. "With the 'sss' sound?"

"I want to watch Toy Tory," he tells me.

I mouth out the title, silently moving my lips and clicking my tongue at him.

"Papa?"

I lift him up by his armpits and carry him to the kitchen table; he's limp in my arms as I plop him down on the folding chair and open the workbook.

"Try 'canary'," I say.

"No. I want to watch a movie. I want to watch *Toy Story 2*."

"Canary."

"No."

"Noah! Say the words. Say them right."

Noah doesn't say anything, he turns his head and points furtively towards the living room. He bites his lips and points and points.

"Say 'canary', Noah. Come on!"

"Anary."

"Close. Try it again."

"Canary."

"Good," I tell him.

Only, I really can't tell if he said it right. 'Canary'. What does that mean? It's some sort of animal I think.

"Okay – um, try 'salad'."

"Salad."

"Right."

I'm guessing. Salad?

"Papa. I want to watch *Toy Story*!"

"Hmmmm . . . "

"Now."

"One more."

"Now."

"Try one more word," I tell him. "'Umbrella'," I say. Only it comes out like a question.

"Umbrella?"

The Comfort of Cubicles

I earn a nice living and my wife earns nothing. I have to put on a blue shirt and an appropriate tie every morning and my wife can remain in her flannel pajamas all day, but there is no question about who works harder.

There is something comforting about being in a public space, something easy about the way my chair swivels and the cubicle walls close in around me. I get to pretend to be a grownup all day.

Being a parent forces you to draw on all your social modes, all your identities, simultaneously. My wife is, everyday, Cathy's daughter, Alice's granddaughter and, probably, her third grade teacher's student. She's fully engaged in a process that goes back generations.

I get to pretend to be outside of history; I get to play, if not my own game, then at least a game created by corporate powers so large as to be anonymous.

I cross the lobby and chat with the security guard while I wait for an elevator. He's talking about the upcoming election or maybe a football game he's paid to watch on television. I'm not really listening. The elevator arrives and I step inside; I press a button and I'm lifted to the offices above. It requires no effort. It's so easy.

And everything keeps going like this, just fine, perfectly smooth, until I get to my desk.

Staring at my pencils and paper, scanning the memos and schedules and instructions, I don't know how to proceed. Should I sit down? Should I pick up the phone first, check my messages? I turn around and proceed to the water cooler, stalling for time while I try to find my bearings.

I can't get the spigot to work. I pull and push and press but nothing but a dribble comes out.

There is still something comforting about the way my chair swivels, but everything else is unfamiliar and vaguely threatening. My shirt collar is tight around my neck, and I pull at my tie.

Who am I if I'm not my father's son and my grandfather's grandson? Who am I when I'm not following my third grade teacher's instructions?

I sit down at my desk and try to remember what a cocktail glass looks like; all I can come up with is a milk carton, a can of apple juice.

I stand up again, randomly, but I stumble and have to steady myself with the chair. It's too much for me, this life outside the box of history. There is no ground, nothing solid beneath the orange wall to wall carpeting.

A Sneeze, a Sailboat, Speech

My son won't talk to me, he won't do anything but move his lips up and down and click his tongue.

"'Spaceship'?" I try. "Come on, you like that word."

He just stares at me.

"Okay, then try 'spaceman'. 'Spaceman'."

One of us has to concede, but for the moment we just sit and stare at each other. I hold the worksheet up to him, gingerly and with two fingers, as if I'm asking his opinion; perhaps the worksheet has gone bad and ought to be thrown out.

I'm caving, but I haven't given in yet. Noah stares at the worksheet but doesn't indicate anything. He's unmoved.

What was it like for me, back when I was belligerent and silent, when I couldn't pronounce 'S' words or spell my name? I haven't thought about it for a long time, other than remembering that trip to the YMCA. It's one more thing that I've forgotten and I add it to the list:

1. Bicycles
2. Chewing Gum
3. Light Switches
4. Umbrellas
5. My Childhood.

"'Spaceman'," I say.

"Spaceman," my son replies, or at least I hear his voice, but his lips don't move. "Spaceship." I hear it again.

My mother told me that there was a word for all of this, for these kinds of experiences. The word was deja-vu. The way she said it, pronouncing it quickly and waving the idea away with her hand, I figured I shouldn't ask for more details. Deja-vu was like sneezing, like a mental sneeze; that's what she told me, and then she waved her hands like something smelled bad. There was no way for me to tell her that my sneezes were something more akin to premonitions. And I could not tell her, for instance, that I knew with complete certainty how and when my aunt and uncle were going to die.

My uncle had been teaching me how to dribble a basketball, how to cup my hand just right, how to keep it going, and I realized that his mind would go first. He scared me as he ran up and down the driveway making lay-up after lay-up, because I knew that he had a vessel that was clogging, a major artery in his brain was on the verge of bursting open.

And then later, when his wife was serving me cookies and lemonade, I saw that her lungs were filling with tumors and that she would be unable to breathe when the process ended. I didn't want her to touch me. I didn't want her cookies.

"Soup. Sunshine. Seashell by the seashore," I say the words aloud, trying to break the spell.

"Why did you say 'soup'? Why did you say that?" Noah asks. He sits there biting his lip and squirming in his chair, and he looks like he's holding back tears, but I don't respond. If he wants to talk to me he'll have to use his voice. He has to learn.

"I don't want to!" Noah leans toward me and grabs my arm. He stands up in his chair and then hangs from my shoulder, lets his body go limp and expects me to catch him. I do nothing and he hits the floor – hard.

"Why did you push me down?" he wants to know. "Why are you mad at me?"

When I was maybe five or six I used to hide from my mother, sometimes for up to an hour, by standing very still in the center of the room. I learned how to hide in plain view by not being seen.

I would pretend that I was leaving the universe, the universe where I was a little boy with a mom and a pop, and go to a universe where I was just air. I would look at the little parts of the world, down deep to the really small bits, and I would let myself cross over into nothing as I stood perfectly still on my parents' oriental rug. Then, walking with the pattern, I would move away, under the couch or up the stairs, and my mother wouldn't see me. She wouldn't see anything; she would slowly wander through the room reading copies of People magazine and doing the crossword puzzles. Maybe she would call out to me occasionally, slowly like she was having a hard time remembering my name.

Noah is climbing around under the table and I'm ignoring him. He's thumping the table with his feet, his knuckles. And I can hear him in my head.

"I'm not going to be the same. I don't want to be the same.

No. No more worksheets. No more talking."

"Sailboat. Salesman. Soothsayer," I tell him.

"No. No. No."

At school, while the teacher's aide was busy writing the months of the year on the chalk board, busy using the colored chalk to make yellow suns and green pine trees and purple flowers, I floated up to the front of the class and used my mind to open her purse. I remember I just followed the cracks in the floor, the lines around the floorboards, until I could see that her purse was crammed full of tubed shape devices wrapped in paper packaging, and she had a number of medicine bottles, some coins, a paper cup, lipsticks . . .

I had a crush on this teacher's aide, and in order to impress her with how much I knew I started asking questions about each item. I asked what the tubes were for, and why she had so many pills, and what she wanted with so many lipsticks.

I was sent to the principal's office because I could determine what was in the purse without really looking, could look inside things with my mind. Obviously this was a bad thing. A very bad thing.

The principal called my mother, and she took off from work early and came to pick me up, to take me home. On the way to the car I told her that I hadn't been peeking, not really, that I hadn't been stealing or snooping, I only did it with my mind.

My mother told me not to lie to her, to never lie to her, and to get in the car and to never, ever, do what I'd been doing, what I could do, again.

I never, ever, did it again.

I'm not forgetting things, not really. More to the point, the only reason I'm forgetting staplers and billboards and light switches is because of this remembering.

I drop the worksheet, push it across the formica table top.

Back then, when I was a boy, I stopped my brain from sneezing by putting my finger under my nose, and now I'm asking my son to do the same thing, or least I'm asking him to cover his mouth and nose and to use a tissue. I'm teaching him to say 'deja-vu' and 'coincidence' and 'fluke' when what I should be saying is 'gesundheit'.

"Sailboat." My son climbs up from under the table, sits across from me, and smiles a hesitant smile. "Sailboat?"

"Noah?" I don't say his name but think it.

"Papa?" he asks in my head. "Listen: 's', 'sh', 'buh', 'tah'." Noah doesn't say a thing.

Working Beneath the Surface

The sun is shining through the plate glass windows; the orange carpet is springy under my feet. I walk through the office, smiling into the cubicles, waving, and then I forget where I am.

"Dah!" I say. "Dah. Dah. Dah."

"Hey. Did you finish the glass? They're breathing down my neck. The client is here today, and I don't have anything to show him."

"Daahh-ann." It's Dan. That's Dan, but what is he showing me?

"Here's the napkin," he says. "What do you think?"

"What? What is it?"

Dan looks at his sketches, at the portfolio of paper and cloth napkins that he's spread out in front of me, and winces.

"It's . . . " he starts.

"I'm trying to make the Spaceman talk," I tell him. "I'm the Spaceman, the spacey man, and I'm trying to talk." Only what I say doesn't sound right. "Aceman chalk," I tell him.

"Jesus," Dan says.

"How are your parents doing?" I ask. "They still rattling around up there in your head? Those paper people?"

Dan looks confused, he starts leafing through his sketches, running his hands across the pencil drawings, smudging the napkins.

The orange carpet is a spring under my feet and I do a little hop, a skip and a hop.

"Aceman. Chalk." I tell him.

Dan has his drafting pencil out again; he's pressing down hard on the paper, scribbling. He's trying to find the lines, sketch them out again.

The Spaceman

I'm tired of talking in public, of advertising, of being less than what I am. I've put the worksheets away, and I'm trying to start over.

"This is where you wanted to go?"

"I like it. Do you like it?"

"It's a temple."

"A church?"

"A temple."

"It's very shiny in here."

"It's dusty."

"No. Underneath and on top of the dust."

"I see what you mean."

"Papa?"

"What?"

"Make the Spaceman talk."

"You know, in temples and churches people like things to be quiet. Not talking is a way to show respect."

"Make the Spaceman talk without noise then."

"Okay, I guess. Can I do that?"

"Sure."

"Hi, Noah."

"Do you like being in space, Mr Spaceman? Do you like being in the big church?"

"Sure."

"What's it like? How is it being so far out and away all the time?"

"I'm in a rocket, in my spaceship."

"Can you see me from there? Can you see Mama?"

"I can see you both."

"Hi. Hello, Mr Spaceman."

"Hello. Hello down there."

"Hi. Hi. Hi."

"Noah?"

"What, Papa?"

"Let's go home now."

"Do you see the colors here, and how shiny it is?"

"Yes. But let's go now. It's time to go home."

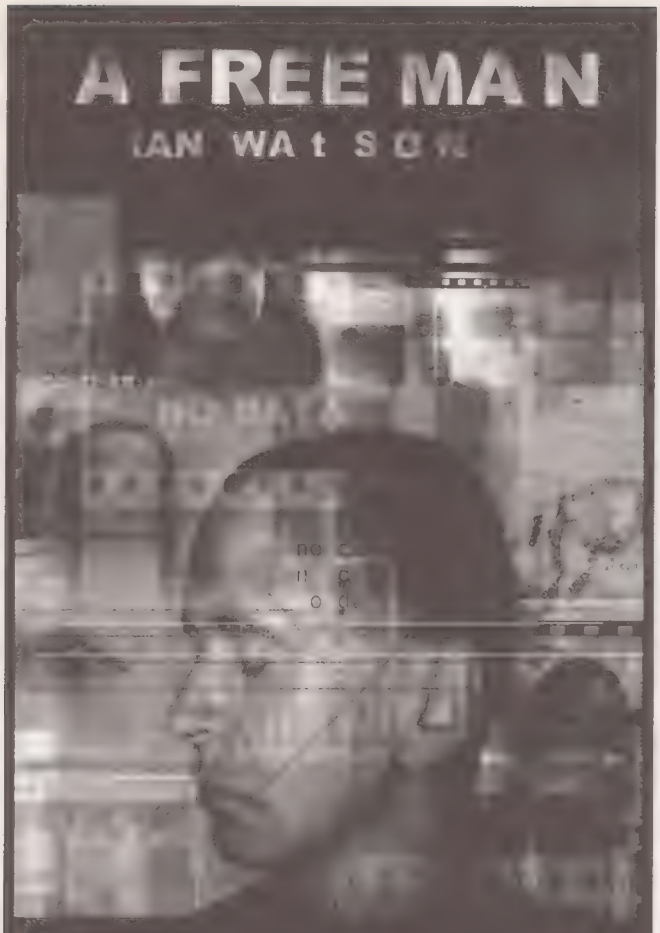
"Okay, Papa. Okay."

We're walking through downtown Portland together, hand in hand past the coffee shops and carwashes and billboards. I'm trying to remember the last video collage my son made for me.

Elmo talked to his fish, Mighty Mouse flew to the moon, and a father let his son be; the scene was taken from an episode of *Mr Rogers's Neighborhood*. This father watched as his son learned to sing and dance, not by following instructions, but just in the son's own way.

"Tree. Tree. Tree." That's what the son was singing. I can remember it now: Elmo's Fish; Mighty Mouse; and Mr Rogers's song "Tree, Tree, Tree"; it's all coming back to me.

Douglas Lain was born in 1970 at Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee. His parents moved him to Colorado Springs shortly after this event. Doug's been writing since he was 18, longer if you include book reports on Anne Frank and papers on the reality of Extrasensory Perception. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife, son and daughter.



Sun glared from a clear blue sky. I was standing in front of a letting agency, photos of houses and flats in the window. The plate glass reflected an image of myself – and I had never seen this person before.

I felt calm, analytical. Average roundish face of fresh complexion, hazel-eyed, neat light brown hair, medium height, medium build, late-thirties perhaps. A holdall at my feet.

I was wearing lightweight fawn slacks and jacket over a creamy cotton open-neck shirt – the weather was hot. Delving in a pocket I found a multicard, everything on one piece of plastic. I knew what such a card was. Small photo, and the name George Freeman. But who was I?

In the holdall I found brand-new clothes in their wrappings. No diary or organiser or other clues.

Handsome street nearby – in Regency style, marred by shop frontages. I knew what Regency was. Pocket park and war memorial closer at hand. In the middle distance, larger public parks and a sandstone edifice fronted by a colonnade, upon which: ROYAL PUMP ROOM AND BATHS in gold letters below umpteen floral baskets. Girls strolled by, their accents nasal Midlands, followed by a couple of Sikhs sporting red turbans. I knew Sikhs.

Why else should I be here but to rent a place to live? So I went into the agency.

A top-floor furnished flat in much-sought Lansdowne Crescent. The owner lived far off in Brighton; excellent. I was in Leamington Spa miles away in the Midlands. Oh I didn't need to view the flat first. And I'd been working abroad for years. When the raven-haired, hawk-nosed Asian woman put my card into a reader, some personal data appeared on screen. British citizen, single, occupation technical journalist, born Coventry 4th August 1974, same day as the receipts, so this was my birthday.

Three months' pre-payment plus a refundable deposit, total €5,800. Direct debit for subsequent months. Online, my card coped.

When I left the agency, with printed-out map and directions, I soon passed a statue of Queen Victoria. A plaque stated that during the Second World War the blast from a German bomb had pushed her an inch sideways on her plinth. As I could see. I myself felt sideways to life. Must buy some food and coffee and wine. I thought I liked red wine.

My sanctuary! From the outside, elegant. The crust of pigeon droppings on the front window ledges was only noticeable from within. The furnishings were hardly smart decor, a mixture of the frumpy and the functional. Other prospective tenants may have demured but I didn't care.

Long ago a cook and a maid may have shared this top floor. Why else would the bathroom have two entrances, one from my bedroom, one from the present hallway? The huge old tub of enameled cast iron with claw and ball feet and giant taps was in fashion once again, though how did I know this?

My neighbours below were a young childless Scottish couple, the Macintyres, who both worked in finance, and at ground level a retired tax inspector and his burly wife. After initial encounters we did not hobnob.

I duly bought a computer, a printer, a card reader, and discovered precious little more about myself. No driving license, although I knew how to drive. Medical record absent. I had perfect teeth and I never felt in the least unwell. Might my body be a better body than most, even if nothing out of the ordinary to look at? Surely my card was smarter than most cards because my bank balance always hovered around €8,000. I would spend and the balance would top up. I studied the credits on screen with no intention of phoning the bank for an explanation. Don't look a gift horse, don't muddy the waters.

I must tell about Kate.

Mornings I would surf the web, an activity which seemed second nature. Amnesia . . . National Missing Persons Bureau . . . an estimated *quarter of a million people* disappear in Britain every year. The figure seemed incredible; how many years till the whole population disappears? Actually, the answer was a good two centuries at least, so the population would keep topping up! Those people, many of whom were teenagers and young adults, didn't literally vanish. Britain seemed the most scrutinised nation on Earth – surveillance cameras everywhere, face-recognition software. How could people disappear so easily?

In order to find somebody you'd need to be looking for them, and who was looking for me but myself?

Kate. Around lunchtime I would take a walk. Particularly pleasant was the Royal Pump Room and Baths. In the late 18th century saline mineral springs were discovered and Leamington became a fashionable spa town. Nowadays the Pump Room complex consisted of public library, a little museum incorporating an ornate former Turkish bath, an art gallery, and a lovely cafe with newspapers and de luxe baguettes. In the cafe the supply of medicinal water had been restored: it flowed down a construction of red stone into a basin equipped with tiny taps, and it tasted foul.

Kate worked in the art gallery, her long crinkly chestnut hair worn loose in what I thought of as a bashful style – at odds with her bold features – as if she employed the tumble of hair to half hide her face. There was an air of vulnerability about Kate as well as a hint of coltishness, as if metaphorically she might let her hair down – had she not already literally done so, maybe subconsciously, with the opposite intention. She was in her mid-twenties, slim, my own height, and she wore a pendant of amber on a copper chain. I felt desire.

Since I was a regular visitor we began to greet each other. One day we coincided in the cafe, where she was ordering a cappuccino during her coffee break.

Make it two. Let me treat you. So we shared a table.

I was a writer. A writer visits libraries. From London, big place. Living on my own. Still searching, I guess.

She lived with her aunt and uncle in Leam Terrace. That was on the far side of the Jephson Gardens, named in honour of a 19th century doctor and philanthropist. Marble statue of him in a big stone rotunda. Mr and Mrs Ferguson had owned a florist's shop until they retired. Passionate gardeners. Kate was a Ferguson too.

Her parents had split up. Dad was an engineering consultant, always travelling. Her Mum fell in love with an Australian. Kate had flown out once to Sydney but she didn't like the land of Oz.

She confided, "Mum and Dad hadn't been getting on but they waited till I was through art college. I sort of knew and didn't know." I felt that she was giving me a message: do not hide things. She fiddled with her pendant.

"I like amber," I said. "If you rub, it attracts. Hair and whatnot."

"It's supposed to help with migraines. Mine started at college. If I worked like mad all week and promised myself a free Sunday, a migraine came as soon as I relaxed." Relaxed *my guard*, I almost heard her say.

"Do you suppose suspecting about your Mum and Dad caused it?"

She shrugged and half hid her face.

Another day, and we were sitting on a bench in the Jephson Gardens. Spray from the many-nozzled fountains in the little lake cupped rainbows. Some rain clouds brooded, dirty bales of wool cut by bright shafts of sunshine. A cool breeze blew, harbinger of Autumn. Kate wore a cream hooded fleece jacket unzipped over a light jumper moulded by the half-apples of her breasts, khaki cargo trousers, and brown leather boots. A gang of Canada geese croaked gutturally. Mallards and mottled pigeons waddled and hopped out of the way.

"Kate, I told you a fib about London. The fact is, I have no idea who I am." I showed her my multicard and told her more.

"Loss of memory? Why didn't you go to the police? I suppose they aren't very bright! They would probably arrest you just in case you escaped from prison." Her gaze narrowed. "What do you live on?"

I told her about my ever-renewing credit.

"That's very useful." Her voice sounded dull. "Some of us have to work for a living." I feared she was going to walk away but she hugged herself and said nothing for a while.

"It's rubbish," she said. Was I rubbish too? "What do you really do when you aren't calling at the Pump Room?"

"Surf the web. Look for clues as to what I am. It's as if I'm here to watch out for things. Except, I don't know what or why. I thought of some theories."

"Tell me!" She wished to hear, she wished to believe in me.

Emboldened, I said, "It can't be ordinary amnesia, or I wouldn't have the free money – unless someone took away my memory but they still wanted me to live. Maybe I'm from the future, and travelling back made me forget, but I don't think time-travel is possible logically."

"Maybe you're an alien in a borrowed body, or in one specially made." She was joining in as best she could. "You're here to watch, as you said. Maybe you transmit your experiences to somewhere."

"Apart from you, what experiences have I had?"

"Flatterer. The original-you might be so non-human that no meaningful memories could carry over."

"In what way am I alien, then?"

"You do come equipped with a lot of knowledge of the world, this one, so where's the point? This must be very disturbing for you."

How 'disturbed' might I be?

"That's the odd thing. I felt serene from the first. I'm puzzled, but it doesn't mess me up."

"You don't seem confused."

"It helps to talk. Will you keep this to yourself?"

"Whom should I tell?" She smiled wryly. "People would think I'm naive to fall for such a chat-line: man from nowhere."

The sun had disappeared. A few fat preliminary raindrops fell on the tarmac amidst all the bird droppings. Kate smiled at me. Whatever her doubts, I sensed that this was the sort of secret she had been craving all her life, perhaps without realizing until now. Something special, something private.

"It'll pour soon," I said. "Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?"

The lake, rippled by its fountains, became dimpled all over. Kate tucked her hair into her hood and tightened the drawstrings.

She said, "Indian restaurants are usually empty early on."

The next day a package arrived for me in the post, no return address and a blurred postmark.

Inside was a piece of card lettered DRINK ONE. Underneath, tightly packed in polystyrene, were four ampules. Removing one, I stared.

META-DPA/DELUSIONARY PERSONALITY ANTIDOTE/FOR ORAL INGESTION ONLY/USE BY 01 04 10

And a bar code.

Had an experiment run its course and I was now to be restored to my former self, whoever I might be? Was I a volunteer guinea pig? When I swallowed the fluid would a veil be stripped away? Would a phone number occur to me?

"Hullo," I would say, "it's Harry." Or Tom, or Dick. And they would come to collect me.

Why send me four ampules? Because I might not remember immediately and totally?

I put the ampule back, then I went on the web.

Pyschoactive viruses under development in America intended for psychiatry, to tweak the minds of deluded people. To adjust beliefs, erase bad memories, instil better ones. Military laboratories reportedly interested themselves, then there was silence.

The walnut-size amygdala deep in the brain is a sort of emotional arbiter which assigns significance. Target the amygdala and you might rejig a person's priorities. How useful if you could spray your enemies to experience a change of heart, or to become obsessed with, say, washing their hands.

In California six 'Nirvana kids' are on intravenous drips staring blankly, knowing nothing – what happened to *them*? A bad reaction to inoculation against one of the exotic tropical diseases taking up residence in the West, allegedly.

Kate and I sat on the steps of the bandstand near the Pump Room. A brisk breeze blew across a greensward crossed by paths, no funfairs or craft fairs in progress at the moment.

She said, "I wouldn't swallow something that came through the post without explanation." Excitement flickered.

"It's the only lead I have."

"Drink me, as in *Alice in Wonderland*. Either you need four doses, or whoever sent them doesn't know."

"Will you help me with this? Be with me? Watch me?"

She eyed me through a rift in her hair.

"If you're a seducer, what a trick to get me to your flat. Maybe the ampules contain tapwater, then you start misbehaving."

I sensed she was teasing me, so in turn I teased her.

"Surely the maiden should be persuaded to drink the aphrodisiac? Don't you know me better by now?"

She said indignantly, "I'm not a maiden," then perhaps regretted the disclosure. "Why should I know you any better than you know yourself?"

"I'm hoping to know myself better."

"Afterwards you mightn't be the same person I like."

"Any person I could be would treasure knowing you." What strange foreplay this, amidst the wider issue. "The real me must have similar tastes."

Archly: "Is that like a taste for strawberries or doughnuts? I need to think about this for a day or two."

I found Kate in the temporary exhibitions gallery, hung with haunting black and white photographs of architecture by Gaudí. On her table were a dozen copies of a big glossy book about Gaudí costing a steep €50.

I said, "I wonder if I'm being watched to see what I do. Is our secret a secret to whoever sent the ampules?"

She touched her pendant as if it was a protective amulet.

"If only . . . " If only this something between us alone. Awareness that it wasn't brought us even closer, for she said, "I suppose we must discover – the real you, I mean. Do you want to buy a book out of your renewable funds? I only sold one so far."

"I can put it on my coffee table."

"Tonight, George?"

By now the enigma of my identity was blending confusingly with my craving for Kate. The frisson of seduction arises from imposing oneself upon another person in a sedulous and at least temporarily convincing fashion. For all I knew, George Freeman may have been imposed or imprinted upon a very different sort of person, although I suspected not!

Seduction is the ravishment of another's identity, is it not? The bamboozling of someone else, perhaps even with their complicity.

When Kate arrived, she roamed, and I felt ashamed at the saggy green sofa, brocaded armchair, chintz curtains patterned with faded roses.

"At least *this* is modern." My computer, my window upon the information superhighway, its screen saver showing a drift of stars.

After a look into the kitchen, "Can you cook, George?"

"Mostly I eat microwave meals."

"Hmm."

From the fridge I fetched one of the ampules and a bottle of strong sweet Belgian Trappist beer plus glass for Kate. The labels on the ampules had not recommended refrigeration but that seemed sensible. Settling myself at one end of the sofa, I invited her to occupy the other end. As soon as she had poured some beer I raised my potion.

"No time like the present – okay?"

"Ready when you are."

"Cheers, then."

The taste was oily and I coughed. Quickly she passed her beer as a chaser. Then we chatted about the hopes of Uncle Harry and Aunt Liz for the local chysanthemum and dahlia show.

Something was loosening. I wasn't finding a new reality but a sort of unreality, as though I was losing touch with myself yet could find no other self to touch. I tried to explain this.

Such curiosity in Kate's eyes.

"George," she said, "let's go to bed *right now*."

Now. She wanted me at this cusp between one enigma and another. Contrary to what I'd expected, the uncertainty was what inspired her.

She laughed giddily. "Before you change your mind!"

We were on the bed quickly, naked to each other in the half-light from the lounge. Was I experienced in making love? My hands and tongue and cock seemed to know what to do. I only met slight impediment, then I was so involved in imperative and immediate sensations that absorption in her body, and in my own, displaced my unreality. The sensuality of the experience, the rapture of excited nerves, touch, scent, moisture, motion, these ravished me as surely as I ravished her.

Kate moaned, her legs clutching me, and I spent myself, feeling in those moments that what I had drunk was somehow spurting into her, displaced from its original aim.

What self was I spending?

After I softened hotly out of her, I drew back to admire her tufted cleft, grace notes of little moles on her thighs, neat-buttoned belly, breasts in repose, brown nipples still prominent. Kate promptly turned over – in modesty or immodesty?

Tugging the pillow under her midriff, she lay, face hidden by crinkly hair, the half-melons of her bum raised, her legs splayed, at once averting herself from my gaze and exposing herself to me.

Amazingly I found that I was stiff again and I came down upon her, my right elbow bearing much of my weight, my left hand guiding me. After a minute or two of my bouncy thrusting Kate cried out in climax – then she squinted round at me.

"Who are you?" Surely this moment must reveal me.

Her question forced me to take stock. I lay beside her, staring at the ceiling.

"It's as if there's a glass surface . . . with myself etched upon it. I can see through myself. There's nothing beneath, nothing at all. I'm not real."

"Oh you're real all right. I could feel how real you are."

"If you weren't here with me I might have melted like a snowman."

"Jolly good thing I'm here."

"Oh *yes*. Yet I feel I'm *acting* being myself, only there's no actor, just the act. It began early in August and before that, nothing. Now I'm aware of the nothingness."

As I lay beside Kate it was as if a kind of polarization took place.

At right angles to the plane of myself which was etched upon that glassy surface there appeared a sheer precipice which was also glassy. Down and down it dived and on either side it seemed to extend to infinity. Laminated, multi-layered, it seethed with patterns, with what seemed to me like myriads of existences. I caught no glimpse of any real-me, yet I sensed that somehow *everybody* was present there, the whole commonality of human life.

It seemed to me that the etching of myself was a projection from that other vast plane, a projection on to an earthly, human realm. Seized by vertiginous panic mingled with giddy exhilaration, I gasped. Almost, I could have slid down that precipice and become part of it, been absorbed. The fragile etching that was my existence sustained itself because of my illuminated awareness of Kate naked by my side, and of the bed beneath us and the room around us, and of this house connected to a town of streets and buildings and gardens and river, and beyond, the whole of the rest of the world, wonderful in that it existed at all rather than not existing.

Once again I was the etching; the seething gulf had gone. In halting words I explained my vision to Kate.

"God," she said. "No, not God – I don't believe in God. Something else."

"Something human yet vast and deep. I nearly had access to . . . " I couldn't find a name.

"I'm so glad we didn't simply sit on the sofa. I had an intuition. It wasn't just the strong beer. Could the label on the ampules be a lie? Could that liquid be something else?"

"I certainly got no sense of a true self I'd forgotten. I almost lost what I am. But for you being with me. Will you stay here tonight, Kate? Food – we haven't eaten."

"We should get dressed. I'd like a shower first."

Oops. "My tub doesn't have a nozzle attachment. I wasn't thinking."

"Men don't always think about afterwards."

Who was the man, or men, she was thinking of? I put this firmly out of my mind.

"You took me by surprise."

Pertly: "Did I?"

She was a shareholder in my experience. The precipice, the precipice . . .

"Stay tonight?"

"Do you think the same thing might happen again? The vision, you being sucked into it? I think it's over for tonight. Will you fetch me a bath towel?"

"You don't want me to see you walk naked?"

"That would be too casual, don't you think, after what happened?"

She was quite right: I had glimpsed something absolute.

Kate purified herself. Me, I merely got dressed.

We went out to a restaurant in Warwick Street for monkfish and a bottle of Merlot. We weren't any ordinary lovers enjoying a night out.

"You shouldn't take any more of that stuff for a week or so. You might experience a recurrence spontaneously. Let's wait a bit."

How practical she sounded. More experienced than me.

"You're my anchor, Kate."

We would meet for lunch in the Chinese restaurant in Bath Street. Now, to walk her home, or take a taxi?

Kate chose walking, but I must say goodbye a hundred yards short of her aunt and uncle's house.

Red dragons and big bright 3-D plastic plaques of Chinese characters hung on the walls of the restaurant, no doubt for luck. Those plaques were like masks intended for huge fat faces. Kate studied them approvingly. From the set menu we ordered cream of lobster soup and shrimps fried rice. Only a few business people were lunching, none near our table.

She smiled at me brightly. "During my coffee break I popped into the library." From her bag she produced a slim purple large-format paperback, slips of paper as markers. *Aleister Crowley*, the title. On the cover a sensual man with lustrous dark hair lounged in a throne-like armchair. "Heard of him?"

Not in great detail, but I had. "Would-be magician, enlightenment through sex and drugs?"

"Right! I read about him in college. He was born here in Leamington, you know."

News to me.

Inheriting a local brewery funded his parents, then Aleister in turn. However, the parents were Plymouth Brethren, all hellfire and damnation, so the son became very screwed up and rebelled shrilly.

Two bowls of pink soup and two little buns arrived.

"Crowley's motto was 'Do What You Will', free yourself from constraints, be a free man. This meant using sex to achieve magical concentration – to funnel himself, to let things through. Just as we did!"

"Do you believe in magic, Kate?"

"Oh, I've never danced round trees. This is different. This is about how to deepen consciousness." She tapped the book. "The woman involved in such attempts is a 'power holder'. If we hadn't done what we did, would you have been able to cope with your vision? Drink your soup."

I took a few spoonfuls, then said, "So you'll be my priestess?"

She likewise. "Within limits. Crowley was into sado-masochism and buggery. Those aren't nice."

Kate, living in elegant Leam Terrace with her gardening aunt and uncle and working at the gracious Pump Room art gallery, was definitely nice; but now she was unleashed from self-restraint. Two blokes near the door were talking about cars while we spoke about magic and buggery.

She opened the book. "Listen to this, it's a quote from Jung. He had visions of what he called an 'underground world'. Jung

says, 'these figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial instinct, oops, the crucial *insight* that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life.' Jung considered those were real people. What do you make of that?"

The shrimps fried rice arrived very quickly.

"I'm a real person, and I'm also imaginary?"

"What imagined you?" She tucked in.

Evidently we weren't going to jump into bed again idly. The event must be well orchestrated.

Kate nodded at the decor. "I once saw a movie where everyone wore masks at a ceremonial orgy. Masks erase the face, the personality, whatever. They allow you to embody something else. Masked sexual magic," she murmured. "Our museum has all sorts of things stored away. I'm sure I'll find a couple of masks. Hmm, this rice isn't bad. Even ordinary people can become extraordinary if the window opens in them. Of course you're already out of the ordinary."

"Most of the time I feel quite ordinary."

"Not the other night you didn't." She eyed me assessingly. "In a way you *are* Mr Average. Neutral isn't the right word for your face, but you could rob a bank and no one would be able to describe you properly because there's no peculiarity to latch on to. It's a lulling face."

"I'm robbing a bank all the time, Kate."

During the next two days rain sheeted down constantly. The whole of the Midlands was deluged. Partly because of the grim weather, I felt that I ought to compile an account of my life up to date. Did not my multicard claim that I was a writer?

After a while at the keyboard I decided that writing is a way of thinking. In the process of writing I was discovering aspects and implications. Ought I to show Kate what I wrote? Might it embarrass her? I would decide when I had done.

From the local radio I gathered that, swollen by millions of gallons from upstream, the river Leam had risen and risen. Normally it flowed placidly twenty feet below that road bridge by the Pump Room, but now the water was higher than the bridge. A large part of the Jephson Gardens, even a considerable part of the Parade, were submerged. Apparently the same happened a few years previously, so lots of sandbags had been rushed into place to protect buildings in the vicinity. Nevertheless, pressure of water burst plate glass windows, and cellars became cisterns.

I woke at last to clear sky. Half way through the morning Kate phoned me to meet her by the statue of Queen Victoria.

On the lower reaches of the Parade, mallards and Canada geese were swimming. The colonnaded Pump Room rose behind an encompassing rampart of grey bags. A couple of Territorial Army soldiers stood on the barricade, smoking cigarettes. Rowing boats and outboards plied to and fro. A crowd marvelled and took photos. A TV crew was filming.

Kate eased herself off a boat and waded towards me, water lapping round Wellington boots.

"What a useful panic." Opening a carrier bag, she let me glimpse two small white-painted wooden masks, one cupping the other. "These are Japanese Noh masks. Look after them. I must get back. We're still shifting stuff in case the dyke fails and the water overtops the flood doors."

"Flood doors?"

"Heavy metal plates that slot into grooves in the door jambs, though I'm sure they'll leak." She chuckled. "I could have taken the masks anyway, but this makes it more of a drama. Make sure you buy some ribbon to tie the masks to our heads."

I had laid the two masks on the coffee table, ribbons duly attached. Flat and blank, they faced the ceiling.

Kate arrived. Same Belgian beer for her, another ampule for me. She checked my ribbons, then took a CD from her bag.

"Will your computer play this?"

"Oh yes."

"That's good. It's the sound track to the film *1492* – rolling hypnotic music and priests chanting in Latin."

"What characters do those masks represent in the Noh drama?"

"I haven't the foggiest. They're masks, with no expressions. In Japanese drama you waggle your fingers to convey feeling." Her fingers fluttered beside her right eye. "I weep."

"Kate, last time you were here we took no precautions." I had shopped for something else as well as ribbons.

She cocked her head and long hair. "Oh normal George. How could I become pregnant if you aren't real? We're taking risks, don't you see?"

The speakers of my computer filled the flat with oceanic chords and priestly voices.

"Anything happening yet? Let's start anyway. I'll undress in the bathroom and put on the mask. You do so here. We meet in the bedroom, and we don't utter a word. Leave the door wide open for the music."

Kate took the mask and her bag with her. I hoped she would be pleased to see the long rubber mixer tube with shower nozzle which I had also bought.

While monks chanted, we stood nude a few yards apart, smooth masks hiding our faces. Kate was no longer her everyday self but a representative of everywoman. Maybe I was everyman. My cock was stiff. Pace by slow pace she advanced until she took me in hand. A priestess anoints herself with unguent. As she steered me and adjusted her poise we merged. The music swelled, music of passage towards a new world.

Maybe because I was standing upright on this occasion, the precipice, when it appeared, was horizontal, a vision without vertigo. No fear that I might fall. I prepared to fly forward across that plane, each slow upthrust of my cock building towards this launching. Our masks touched. Our palms pressed one another's buttocks.

When I came, I flew.

An ocean of people of all races. For a moment I was a woman in a paddy field, looking out from her eyes and aware of her existence. I was an old man on a train who was reading a Spanish language newspaper. Another moment, and I was a hugely fat wrestler about to be thrown . . .

It was as if I were part of the common feelings and concepts of which minds are made, of the shared themes upon which individual persons are variations, themes out of which a person's identity is braided together, their own experiences in life superimposing personal patterns upon a shared substratum; and by focusing in such and such a way I could share with them, though only for a moment – if my focus shifted fractionally I skidded and became someone else.

Those photomosaic jigsaws which show a face or a prowling tiger or the Taj Mahal, yet which are made up of thousands of different miniature images: such was the situation, only richer by far. I myself was the face, the portrait, the persona composed of myriads of individual selves.

Of my own free will I pulled back from this gigantic jigsaw of humanity and was myself, the same George as ever.

Naked but for a mask I stood telling Kate this, our bodies together still.

She pulled off my mask with one hand, and her own with the other, and dangled them shoulder high.

"Can you find *me* among the myriad? Am I one of them?"

"I suppose you must be. But it's like billions of names in no order at all in a chaotic phone book – how do you find a particular person?"

"Two ampules to go," she said. "Let's not rush. We'll keep the masks here. They won't be missed."

After Kate finished showering, I microwaved chicken korma and pilau rice and we shared another bottle of strong Belgian beer.

Late morning, bright and breezy outside. Just finished keyboarding up to date. A knock on my door – not a ring of the bell. Presumably must be the tax inspector or his wife, because both the young Scots work weekdays.

Come to complain about sexual magic in the same residence? If only the tax inspector and his wife knew!

No: two men whom I never saw before. The dark one in a suit looks tough, the other, casually dressed, is the picture of innocence, fresh-faced, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed.

"How did you get up here? Who are you?" I'm ready to slam the door and throw my weight against it. I'm thinking robbery rather than evangelists.

"So sorry to bother you," says Innocence. Cultured Home Counties accent. Con-men of some kind? "Might I come in and talk about something confidential?" He smiles engagingly. "Two chaps is a bit intimidating, so my colleague will remain outside. I'm unsure quite how you'll take this." He inclines his head. "May I?"

"I'd like a little more explanation."

"Fair enough, Mr Freeman. My name is Charles Parrish. I moved in downstairs very recently. The Macintyres have gone elsewhere for a while."

Gone elsewhere? For a while?

"I'm in the service of the State, you see, Mr Freeman, and your existence is a bit of a puzzle to us. I have to investigate."

An identity card with photo appears. Not a very informative identity card, nor is he going to let me carry it off to my card-reader.

"Do I have you to thank for sending me those ampules?"

"You certainly seem to have made use of them, you and Miss Ferguson."

Oh *shit*.

"This is a bit delicate. May I come in for a private chat? Geoff will stay here, though I'd appreciate it if we could leave the door ajar."

If I attack Charles Parrish, Geoff can rush to the rescue.

"How can you move people out like that?"

"Interests of national security, eh? The Official Secrets Act to stop the Macintyres from gossiping. May I?"

"I don't have much choice."

Charles Parrish relaxes on my sofa, eyeing me at the table, computer next to me.

"Above all I want to avoid being confrontational, or seeming heavy-handed. It's just that we need to discuss this business."

"So long as you leave Kate out of it."

"May we get on to first name terms? George, that is chivalric of you, but easier said than done. Will you call me Charles?"

"I can think of lots of things to call you." Fluttery feeling in my tummy. "Is my flat *bugged*? Have you been eavesdropping?"

"Such a quaint term, eavesdropping. One thinks of people hanging from a roof. Though it refers to lurking where the raindrops fall."

"How interesting. *Is my flat bugged?*"

"Nowadays even phones which aren't in use can listen to conversations. You'd be surprised what faint background noise a computer can screen from loud music. One can have tiny radio mikes that you'd never notice, stuck almost anywhere. Without dotting all the 'I's and crossing the 'T's, let's accept that I know you've been having unusual experiences."

"You sent those ampules, with that *Alice in Wonderland* card, so I would have experiences."

"No no, sending those was like stirring an ants' nest with a stick, see what happens. In your case, George, what happened would appear to be fairly major and surprising. Very ingeniously exploited, if I may say so."

"How on earth did you find me?"

He considers, then confides, "Computers, actually. Anomalous transfers of money setting off warning bells." So in fact this *is* because of my renewable credit! "I had best fill you in on some background. Before we get on to that, what do you honestly think you are?"

If he holds a key to my existence, I desperately want it. My anger and anxiety at what Kate and I share having been *captured*, as if by a blackmailer's camera, soiling our privacy, will have to wait.

'Anomalous Person' is the name for what I am. I'm an A-Pee.

Charles's people know of four other A-Pees residing in this country, people for whom no explanation exists, the link between us being anomalous transfers of funds, really modest funds compared with financial swindle millions, modest enough

to pass unnoticed if a big high-speed computer was not on the job, networked to bank computers.

"Looking for signs of terrorists, you know. You aren't one of those."

Could A-Pees be missing persons living under aliases? No. Illegal immigrants? No no. Foreign spies? No no no. Demonstrably the A-Pees are inexplicable people whose inexplicable bank accounts are topped up inexplicably as if the software writes itself.

"You weren't put into the world stark naked, or you wouldn't have lasted long. Gifted with renewable funds, only an idiot would go out to work. To occupy your time there's the puzzle of who you are and deciding what to do. Hide at home and watch TV. Go out and have fun, whatever."

Charles becomes chatty, as if he's determined to make me into a team member. Give him his due, he does a fair job. He's a good raconteur, and he seems transparently honest to the point of indiscretion. I mustn't forget that Geoff would probably kill me if necessary. Meanwhile, it's all velvet glove.

"I mentioned illegal immigrants as one idea. This happens to be a particular bugbear of the present Home Secretary. You can hardly blame Jack."

"Jack?"

"Jack Vetch, you know." Such familiarity. "Illegals have been jam-packing northern France for years. That's merely one entry route, for unfortunates who are really down on their luck.

"Jack started out as a real firebrand, human rights and whatnot. Goodness me, power and maturity do bring new perspectives. These days Jack's very much into defining and limiting certain freedoms and rights for the sake of society as a whole. Rights of abode, rights of asylum seekers, rights of access to sensitive information. Just name a right, Jack is busy limiting it."

"You're on close terms with him?"

"Sometimes we're pushed for time by his diary. For example, last week Bangladeshi community leaders were due to arrive imminently. In the medium term Bangladesh is probably doomed by rising seas and freak monsoons. How far do legitimate family ties extend as regards climate refugees? How much moral responsibility does Britain owe to those who have blood ties with UK passport holders? After the Bangles, Jack had to meet the head of G-Tac – that's the Government Technical Assistance Centre, keeps an eye on internet data-traffic. Shame so much e-commerce has fled to places like Ireland which ban surveillance, but we can't have citizens doing anything they please on the web totally unregulated. Anyway, Jack certainly makes time for me."

"All because of the A-Pee matter."

"Might it be the tip of an iceberg? Jack's very open-minded about possible explanations."

Four, no, five people so far, out of fifty or sixty million. How much is this investigation costing? Quite a lot, apparently. With Charles in charge, and now working in the field because of me.

"Time travellers in our midst, or ETs? If word leaks that the security service is spending money on such topics some people might say that us security boys are feathering our nest by conducting a cockeyed operation. Must hope that the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee remain in the dark unless or until I succeed! Then Jack steeples his hands and asks me, *how about persons from a parallel world?* He's being very supportive compatible with prudence."

Charles is benefitting hugely. Ambitious chap, our Charles. This is his great opportunity. Spots an anomaly, thinks about it, then heads straight for a Home Secretary obsessed with illicit residents.

"You know something Jack hates? Census figures plus or minus tens of thousands. What he'd like to see is microchips in every citizen. Scanners on every corner, and you'll be able to count the population in real time and know exactly who's who and where everyone is. Great commercial side benefits. Put the microchip in the index finger, a point-and-buy society."

"You might buy things you don't want by accident."

"Double-click your finger first."

"What am I? What's your explanation?"

"This might be *wrong*, George, but it's what I'm suggesting to Jack and Jack's willing to be flexible, pending results. I told him I don't go for parallel worlds because one world is a simpler explanation. *One world*, George. And what sort of world is it nowadays? It's a world with a critical mass of people on it, *billions* of us. It's an infosphere as well, a networked information society, globally. I *think* that the infosphere is now so complex and interconnected that it's like a super-computer becoming self-aware. Becoming spontaneously creative, George – producing some virtual people who nevertheless have actual substance, solidity, identity. George, the infosphere has dreamt you into existence."

Charles is imaginative. He's ingenious. He's very smart. Can he be right as well?

"If there are billions of us, why do we need an extra five people? Or is it just five? What about other countries?"

"Other countries may not have noticed yet. Jack wants to keep this to ourselves for now." In case he becomes a laughingstock? No, for advantage. There's always advantage. "*Why* do we need extra people? Perhaps as an interface, George. A means of access to the infosphere. I *think* you are coming close to this. Aren't you?"

What do I say?

"I'll help you, George, because I want you to help me, and of your own free will. From what I've gleaned, I'm sure I'm right. Also, you *have* been keyboarding a lot. The keys on a keyboard each produce tiny electrical signals which are all unique and can be detected using certain equipment. Unfortunately the equipment Geoff installed downstairs can't pick up a coherent text, but I do surmise it's an account of what you experienced. Am I right, or am I right? I'm *dying* to read it, George, and reading may be less embarrassing than you doing an interview face to face. I may have a few supplementary questions afterwards."

Delete the file named George right now? Immediately empty the Recycle Bin? Any clever computer chap can retrieve the file. Even if I hurl the computer to the floor and shatter the hard disc Humpty-Dumpty can probably be put together again.

"Tell me more about yourself, Mr Parrish."

He does. Eton, then King's Cambridge. Studied computer science, played cricket for his college. Recently he split with his girlfriend. This caused him a spot of anguish. She was Zara Wyvern, as on TV, the sexy leading actress in the paranormal comedy series, *Z-Files UK*. "Actually, she was born Sarah Wise. Jack was bothered about that connection, given the nature of this particular investigation. He had checked my file, of course. What if *Z-Files UK* screens an episode about the A-Pee phenomenon, tipping off, well, who knows? It would be stupidly indiscreet of me to have told Zara *anything*, but Jack still thought the connection a risk. I was a bit heartbroken, George. She was a magical person. When this is all over, if it ever is, I don't think I can take up with her again. She was rather hurt."

Underneath the suavity how ruthless he is.

"I've invested a lot in this."

"Have you sent ampules to any of the other A-Pees?"

"God no. One at a time. Experiments must have controls in them. The, er, document, George?"

"I don't want Kate to know you've read this. Or eavesdropped on us."

"Let me read it first."

Reluctantly I click on the printer icon.

I sit, feeling empty. Thinking of Kate, busy at the art gallery. After a while I realise that I need to eat something and boost myself with a coffee.

Two hours pass before Charles returns. Back into my life he bounces with cheery enthusiasm, sits on my sofa, crosses his legs.

"I told Geoff to stay downstairs." See how I trust you now. "What you wrote is absolutely wonderful, so vivid. You're at the cutting edge, George. You're my main man. I have gained a real respect for Kate Ferguson."

To the same extent that he respected Zara Wyvern, wounding her in order to advance himself? An actress as popular as Zara can probably fend for herself.

Yet why assume so?

Compared with Charles I'm emotionally naive. Charles has years of real experience of manipulating people. Kate has more knowledge of life than me. She has been to bed with at least one other man, about whom she hasn't told me; and why should she? Charles may look innocent but I'm the innocent one.

"Miss Ferguson's a game girl. She'll need to be brought into the loop, sensitively."

"You just hang on there a minute!"

"It's a problem, I agree. We can't risk pissing Kate off – yet how can you pretend everything's the same, especially now that you know about A-Pees? I don't think you'll be a good pretender. She'll know. Might even put you off your stride – "

Off my stride!

" – though I'll be absent from *chez moi* during any sessions. I can hardly sit downstairs listening, or you might feel inhibited. Off to the pub I'd go. Couple of pints. Downstairs would be vacated."

Apart from recording equipment.

"You're coping wonderfully, George. You're very level-headed. You popping into other people's lives: if you *can* focus that, imagine the possibilities. What's the President of China thinking about? What's a certain terrorist leader planning, and *where is he*?"

This has freed Charles from reliance on the goodwill of any Home Secretary of any political party. He's poised to become quite powerful.

"Quite conceivably, George, the prospect might excite Miss Ferguson. Judging by what you wrote she was in search of an adventure. Depends how you present it. I suppose putting her on a retainer might make her feel like a kept woman, a Russian sex-spy. How is she on patriotism?"

"Last resort of the scoundrel, isn't it?"

"And I'm the scoundrel." Charles laughs. "There's more to this than spying. Global species awareness! That's a lot more humanistic than my original infosphere idea. If we can commune with humanity as a whole, think of the possibilities for harmony and mutual understanding."

Does he mean this sincerely? Maybe he can believe two different things at once.

A late afternoon phone call from Kate. Flood water is receding fast. Already the Parade and the area round the Pump Rooms is clear though messy.

"Something has happened, Kate."

"Have you had an experience?"

This is hardly a private conversation.

"You might say so, but not that sort. We need to meet."

"Sounds mysterious."

"I'll explain when I see you. One of the benches in the gardens up near the clock tower? Five-thirty?"

I arrive early. Just through the gateway is a summer-house often frequented by alcoholics who ignore the NO ALCOHOL ZONE signs threatening huge fines they couldn't possibly pay. The summer-house is empty. On a bench near the clock tower sits a thin man wearing a raincoat, collar turned up, corduroy cap on his head. Looks as though he's listening to a Walkman while he reads his newspaper and occasionally looks around.

I walk up the side path past a holly, its prickly foliage forming a natural teepee. Inside, on a dirty sheet of plastic lies a dirty blanket, but for now nobody's sleeping rough. Choose a bench facing a grassy expanse. I brought another print-out. Spend my time re-reading it.

I tell Kate while her hair hangs forward in a veil.

She says at last, "Well, it's happened a bit sooner than I expected. So the security service sent the ampules. Now those must be paid for. I hope this isn't badly written porn about me."

A man might let his emotions run riot.

"If you hadn't written anything you'd still have been compelled to tell. How descriptive is this? I'll need time to digest your opus. I'd better go home, head for the hills. Walk me up to the top of the park."

The shortest route from here to Leam Terrace, the bouncy foot-bridge over the weir, must be closed on account of the flood. Below the weir, during the 19th century, elephants used to bathe in the river. A circus owner would march his beasts down the Parade from their quarters.

The thin man in the raincoat follows the path running parallel to ours, on the far side of the grass.

We halt at the tiny gatehouse with enormous chimneys. On the other side of the road a meadow has become a lake. How fast things alter.

"So, my universal man, how about lunch tomorrow at Jephson's above the furniture shop? Personally I'd prefer Pizza Express but it got soaked." And Kate kisses me quickly goodbye.

Accompanied by a pianist, a saxophonist is performing mournfully in Jephson's for the lunch crowd. Window-doors to the balcony are open, admitting traffic noise. The lasagne is fair to average. Flanked by a pillar, our little table on the periphery is almost private.

"I feel a bit stripped bare," murmurs Kate as I crane to hear her. "At least it's only words, not pictures. Nice to know you're enthusiastic about me. I suppose I must meet this Charles. Not in your place, though – I don't want him visualising."

"You're taking this very calmly."

Momentarily she grins. "Should I scream?"

"He has good manners, him being an Etonian."

"Do I detect blokes ganging up?"

"No. You don't."

"That's just as well."

Charles is waiting outside his door. "How did she react?"

I shrug. "Well enough."

"Game girl, as I said. Why don't you come in for a drink?"

"I don't want to talk to you about her."

"Of course not. No harm in a drink, though! As they say in Spain, *mi casa, su casa.*"

"What's that mean?"

"My home is your home. My flat is your flat."

"And vice versa!"

"Compromises, George, we make them all the time. Look at that problem with Zara and me. No man is an island, especially not on this island under siege by illegals all the time." Charles holds his door wide.

The Macintyres are collectors of toby-jugs! Several dozen ceramic hatted heads with handles occupy shelf space and crowd a sideboard. There's Mr Punch and Mr Pickwick and John Bull and a Gin Woman and a Snuff Taker and an Admiral and a Fiddler . . . Must be her obsession. Could be his, though, too.

Charles's most visible contribution to the decor is electronic equipment, and two tall piles of paperback, one of thrillers, one of popular science books, mostly concerning the mind.

He pours Burgundy. "Cheers. I shall be *very* helpful to both of you. Very protective. You aren't exactly a free man any longer, but you certainly used your initiative, both of you. We might *never* have thought of the sexual magic angle, to empower you."

The wine is delicious, though I don't say so.

"I'm wondering, in a while after you establish the necessary mind-set, if you two might be able to go it alone without ampules. Do we absolutely need the Meta-DPA as a catalyst? Maybe that Belgian beer helps. Live yeasts, or whatever. We shouldn't change more than one factor at a time, and that includes your freedom of manoeuvre. I see us as partners, George."

When the meeting takes place in Charles's flat, Kate wears a very long, unrevealing skirt and a shapeless woolly. Charles is the soul of discretion and affability. More good Burgundy.

Smiling with such apparent sincerity, he says, "This is all so totally remarkable, so much bigger than any intelligence applications, though admittedly there *are* those. I'm truly privileged that you'll confide and cooperate."

"I don't want to be debriefed afterwards," Kate tells him.

When he pulls a comic face, she manages a laugh.

"George can write a report or tell you the morning after."

He nods. "Still, the anchor-person may be almost as important. The power-holder." He regards her with such respect.

Who truly holds power now?

"Early days yet," Charles says. "We're making such progress thanks to both of you."

Kate muses. "I suppose if you were the CIA or the KGB we'd be in some guarded place miles from anywhere."

"Dear me, no. Any sort of constraint would be a very bad idea. This is all too delicate and sensitive. We daren't vary anything."

For how long?

We are controlled. Surely Charles will severely restrict the distribution list. Even so, to make love, knowing that I'm obliged to report on what happens and that the details will probably be read by the Home Secretary and by goodness knows who else – our love is no longer *ours*.

Is it love at all? Or simply sex? Or the making of magic – what kind of magic? I'm emotionally confused. Never mind how my body performs, I never made love to a woman before and I may have imprinted on Kate as a chick or duckling imprints on what it first sees after hatching. Undoubtedly Kate is more realistic.

Yet this confusion yields an insight.

If our love, for want of a better word, is not private – not ours alone – this might be very appropriate in so far as I am something that surfs upon the sea of all humanity, a sort of standing wave of false personality, the product of a myriad waves of other living persons.

If I can refine my focus and read the minds of presidents, which parameters may Charles decide to vary? Our liberty, already limited? Who noticed my coming into existence outside of that letting agency – or even earlier, while I shopped, all unawares? Who except Kate would care if I vanish? Can his people get away with kidnapping Kate as well as me?

I wasn't a free man for very long. During the third ceremony, or the fourth or the fifth or the umpteenth, maybe I will discover a way to be truly free.

Ian wrote the Screen Story for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. His newest story collection is *The Great Escape* from Golden Gryphon Press, which will also publish his novel *Mockymen* next year.

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You probably don't need me to tell you this but inconsiderate manners and tacky behaviour have now become ingrained in television broadcasting. Mrs Dodo reports that ITV flashed up an info bar about the next programme during the middle of an actual scene in a recent *Coronation Street*! They've already pushed back the barriers by showing trailers during the credits of the programme that's just finished. The BBC is just as guilty of this as the commercial channels. Only the power of Equity and the broadcasting unions is stopping them getting away with cutting off the credits altogether. There is no time to reflect, no moment of contemplation, or even – alien concept – silence. When you're at home and you reach the end of a novel you don't immediately jump up and do the hoovering or dial recorded weather information, do you?

Apparently cinema audiences are at a thirty year high. Is it any wonder? No. Even though technically far superior than Hollywood Golden Age, the typical modern movie isn't any better plot-wise – but at least the film doesn't fucking keep interrupting itself! If you're really clever, you'll get your friendly Odeon receptionist to tell you the programme starts at seven but the film itself starts twenty-five minutes later so you can skip the Pearl & Dean. Yes I know most people jump up and walk out during the credits. That's *their* choice not mine and at least the closing titles at the cinema aren't disrupted by voice-overs of what's on the next screen.

A typical commercial television segment runs thus: adverts, sponsor's advert, opening titles, programme – short scene. Then comes the real half-time turn-off: sponsor's out-take, car ad, beer/finance/shampoo/snack ad, repeat of same car ad, trailer for another programme, sponsor's lead-in, before finally being dumped back into the programme. On average that's four minutes of interrupted flow. One can see the effect this has had on US TV in particular where at prime time ads come every eight minutes so that shows such as *Friends* and *Frasier* consist of short vignettes rather than cohesive episodes. The writers and script editors have adapted to the medium and one could make a case that comedy is suited to this style . . . but serious drama or documentary needs to build up a head of steam without that appallingly badly lip-synched Standard Life advert with the impossibly smug parents and the capitalist kids continually breaking the flow with its inane mutterings!

And what's with the accepted practice of showing an ad at the beginning of a break and then screening a coda just ahead of the resumption? Are our short term memories really that bad that we need a reminder along the lines of 'Va Va Vroom Vroom Aluminium Motors – they really are the dog's bauxite'?

Britannic Assurance, sponsors of *Frasier* cheerily suggest, 'Tell us about your dreams'.

Here's their phone number: 0845 3055552. Give them a call. Tell them that Freudian one you had about wet caves and tall red towers.

Sports in America are regularly interrupted by words from our sponsor. Given the intermittent, sporadic nature of the action in cricket, Channel 4 are able to schedule ads between balls. So far football has remained sacrosanct although ITV and Sky regularly put up captions advertising what games they're showing next and we accept this as if it's the bloke behind you saying, 'Got tickets for the Newcastle game, Al?' but again it's visual and verbal dilution of the current experience.

If you pick up a magazine, yes it's got ads in it but you can follow the whole thrust of a story or article right through from beginning to end, folding down the offending pages if necessary. Am I being old-fashioned again? No, let me put this in clearer context. Suppose you were listening to the latest Mercury Rev CD and halfway through track two a 'friendly' upbeat voice announced, 'Sill to come on track seven, witty wordplay and subtle use of strings'? Or you're reading the latest Stephen King and chapter three has an announcement pasted onto the text promising horrific developments on page 100 and a prison guard re-evaluating his ethical system on page 175! When you go to the theatre or ballet, as the curtain comes down do you want to be told, 'Showing at the National in ten minutes time: Eddie Izzard in Peter Hall's acclaimed production of Jill Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus In Tights*'?

It seems these days that these days most programmes are simply trailers for what's on next.

Why doesn't TV go the whole hog and just dispense with costly drama – soaps, series, serials, one-offs – altogether? They could still have the occasional news update alongside music programmes which visually consist entirely of mobile phone and mobile vehicle adverts – 'It's a wicked game you play . . . but I like you 'cause you're Bohemian baby!'. If they felt the need to present a front of making meaningful programmes they could just make the trailer. 'I was Mel Gibson. We were soldiers. We died out there. We're all coming back in a tin box together but our wives will stay strong.' See, you've got the gist of it already. Everything can simply be done as a synopsis or treatment.

This would actually be a boon to the many so-called authors I've met in my life who have grandiose ideas for novels, plays, short stories, etc but have never actually finished one. Now they won't have to!

We could celebrate *The Night of a Thousand Trailers* or just show adverts all night. Hang on, aren't Channel 4 already doing this?

We must all have over-stimulated minds today. We're at one and the same time stupendously sophisticated and phenomenally stupid . . . as far as advertisers and broadcasters are concerned. We can't apparently be content with just one thing happening on screen but have to have ticker tape stuff running beneath it. There's *Grandstand* with its yellow and purple graphics in three different boxes – Division One results, current match report, latest vidiprinter scores. Did you follow The African Cup of Nations? It's hard enough, anyway, to concentrate on the stumbling inanities of Garth Crooks but wholly off-putting with a back-projected football continuously expanding and deflating behind his head.

Is it really true that people's attention spans are so short or are they in fact being deliberately driven down by quick fix/brief buzz product; disposable fashion accessory sellers; media tycoons always looking to kick-start a new bandwagon; and soundbite politicians? I lasted the whole three hours of *Lord of the Rings*. OK, I did fidget after two hours but, hey, unless I zoned out I wasn't aware of any advert interruptions nor even obvious product placement.

So is the solution to watch everything time-delayed on video and wind through the ads? There's certainly plenty of people doing that.

Or should we switch to BBC 4 because 'Everybody needs a place to think'? But: a) It's digital so not available to everybody – in fact, hardly anybody! b) The implication is, therefore, that there's no thought necessary with BBC 1 and BBC 2. Mind you, with *Dog Eat Dog* and *Friends Like These* that's probably true.

Yes, everybody needs somewhere to think. Try reading, music, art galleries, even the cinema . . . because TV is making us dumber than ever.

Allen Ashley is the author of the groundbreaking novel *The Planet Suite* (£5 or $8 from the TTA editorial address). Argue with The Dodo at www.ttapress.com

Tales of the golden legend

Remnants of the previous week's snow, hard and blackened, lay in crusty mounds on the sidewalk. An endless flow of pedestrians crunched between the piles. As a man crossed the street, he held his hand to his head to keep the wind from blowing off his hat.

The morning sun sent a shaft of light through the windows of the Italian food store; the round semolina loaves, lined up and stacked on the chrome rack, glowed. In their shadow lay rows of baguettes, bagels, rye, and whole wheat. Farther left lay a company of prosciutto, rosemary, and provolone breads. Several varieties of foccacia rested below on a shelf of their own.

In front of the shelves, a young, hawk-faced woman with pale skin and blue eyes stood at the cash register. A strand of rusty hair hung over her eyes; she kept batting it back as she waited for a customer. Her father, the fat owner in his white apron, had just unlocked the door and flipped the sign from closed to open. He waddled behind the opposite counter to guard his sausages as the first customers of the day entered the store – a pair of stocky women in their mid-seventies carrying wicker baskets.

"Parmesan," one of the women said.

"Romano, romano," the other replied, shaking her basket for emphasis. "Anna Felina always buys romano."

The man holding the hat on his head walked through the door and stopped in front of the counter. He gazed at the loaves, entranced, as though he had sleepwalked into the store and awaited a signal to act. Several minutes passed before he lifted his hand from his gray felt hat and removed his black leather gloves. His hair was dark, like pumpernickel, his skin light like the plain bagels. He stood quietly; the hawk-faced woman asked what he wanted.

Seeming not to have heard her, he stepped back to allow the old women to pay for their cheese.

"And a Tuscan bread," the first woman said to Hawk Face in a demanding tone.

"Not that one, too small," the second woman added as Hawk Face chose the nearest loaf.

The man appeared to listen to something; he stared at the loaves as if they could help him. Finally, after a minute or so, during which time Hawk Face ignored him, he pointed to a round loaf of semolina. All of the semolina brightened, glowing like moons; the other varieties grew darker.

"Did people bake the first bread, or did bread bake the first people?" the man asked Hawk Face as she punched the cash register keys. She looked at him, then at the loaves, and held out her hand for his money. The man paid and left the store. Now smiling as though at a private joke, Hawk Face watched through the door as he put his hand back on his hat and crossed the street.

It was morning, a month since I discovered I could talk to bread. I had sliced a piece from a loaf of rye and spread some butter. The tea had steeped enough; I tossed the bag and added milk. Bit into the bread, began wrapping up the loaf.

"You're not going to finish me?" the loaf asked in a musical tone. Because bread is a collective organism, it speaks like a chorus, a musical blend of male and female.

I stopped wrapping and looked at what remained of the loaf. "Not now, I'm full. Maybe later."

"But you have to. I'm getting old."

"Everybody gets old."

"Then put on some music."

"I'm about to leave for work." Bread can be demanding. Its age gives it a sense of superiority – there has been at least one loaf of bread existing in the world for 10,000 years (since the beginning of agriculture, though maybe longer, the bread isn't sure).

"If you won't put music on, I'll sing."

I slipped into the bedroom for a shirt and the bread began singing a song about making a sourdough sponge.

"Yeast is in the air. Bread is everywhere."

I returned to the kitchen as the loaf finished its song. "I'm late for work," I said, hoping it would not begin singing again.

"So what? Your job isn't vital."

Bread is right. I keyboard text for a company that publishes books on real estate tax law. I could die and nobody would notice.

I looked out the window to check the weather. Gray drizzle. I wound a plaid scarf around my neck. My over-warm apartment always made me forget it was still winter outside. I took the rest of the loaf with me to finish for lunch.

The bread kept talking to me on the train to work. "As the protein chains grew in the primordial sea and became the bacteria base of all life, that bacteria was yeast. Yeast was the first being on a planet of rocks and sea. Therefore all life is bread." This was the second time the loaf had explained bread history to me. I knew that yeast was really a fungus, not a bacteria, but didn't feel like arguing. Besides, I'm always careful not to talk to bread in public.

The first bread ever to speak to me was a loaf of golden semolina bread that I bought in the Italian food store after the final argument with Susan, whom I had been seeing for about eight months. When I took it out of the bag and put it on a cutting board, it asked me if I was planning to toast it.

robert wexler

"I never toast fresh bread."

"Okay, just checking. You seem upset."

I began telling the loaf about Susan, about how I had found out she was having an affair with an English chef at the French restaurant where she worked as a waitress. The semolina said it would let me know if it heard anything from the baguettes in the restaurant, but I said it didn't matter anymore.

Since then I've talked to at least six or seven loaves, each one different. Heavy varieties, like olive breads and anything with meat or cheese, don't say much. White breads are the least interesting, whole grains the most thoughtful. Bagels don't make much sense. Bread has told me that maybe one out a million people can understand its language.

On the way home from work, I stopped to buy a loaf at a bakery near the office. I tried not to be overwhelmed by the bread sounds around me. The fat loaves of country white complained about the skinny onion baguettes, while a basket of whole wheat rolls laughed at its own jokes. I selected a loaf of something called struan. The label on the shelf said it was made from wheat, corn, oats, brown rice, bran, buttermilk, and honey. It laughed and talked at the same time, a lusty, world-loving voice full of confidence and mirth. I saw it entertaining the other loaves, whistling like the sound of a baroque flute. On the way home I bought a newspaper and some fresh mozzarella.

"You don't need cheese with me," the bread said from within the bag. I ignored it. We can't always do what bread says.

At home, I opened the newspaper and scanned some headlines. I turned to where the loaf sat on my counter and asked: "What's going on in the bread world right now?"

"In the Negev, a Bedouin has just pulled a fatir from a sajj and handed it to a guest at his tent. In Austin . . . no, that's boring. Oh, here's a good one." The struan laughed, then continued. "Six blocks from here. A woman just whacked her husband on the side of his head with a long, stale baguette. He's crying, saying he didn't mean anything by it. 'She's nothing to me, I love you honey, I was weak, it was just a fling, trust me, please.' Ha ha ha."

Bread has told me that the mass-produced loaves found in supermarkets are not alive, not real bread. Injected sponge, it calls them. Bread only comes to life with the slow rise method. Mix, knead, let rise. Punch down, let rise again. "Each loaf is interconnected through its yeast culture," bread has said.

I recently saw a man talking to himself on the train. He spoke with great animation, gesturing to the air in front of him. I thought: is that what it looks like when I talk to bread? The man's hands were empty, but how could I know whether there was something seen and understood by him alone?

I was born at 350° in a small, white gas oven. I first became aware inside this metal box as the yeast died screaming silently within me. I lay upon a baking sheet, in darkness relieved only by the pulse of flame visible through round holes in the bottom of my oven-box. I burned with life. I was alone. Time meant nothing. I had being, I had substance. I wondered, is this life, this metal womb?

A sudden light as the door swung down and oven mitts reached toward me – Mother?

My creator, a young woman with hair golden like corn flour, pulled me from the oven and set my baking sheet on a wire rack. As I began to cool, I exulted in my newness, stretched the limits of my crust. At this point I had no notion of those who came before me. I was the universe. Then, The Awareness overcame me – the knowledge of all bread. What can I say about the flames that catalyzed my birth that better loaves have not already said? Potatoes are always potatoes. Water boils, cheese melts, but bread alone mutates. Yeast is one form of life, bread another. From bread all life begins and is sustained.

Unfortunately, bread baking is not a genetically acquired skill, and I, a round loaf of buttermilk white bread, am the young woman's first attempt. I dwelled too long in her oven. I have air pockets, and my crust is far too thick, too chewy. I know I don't have a rewarding life to look forward to; when she realizes the extent of her failure, she will lose her desire to eat me and I will mold.

Because gestation continues out of the oven, bread should not be sliced for twenty to forty-five minutes after birth. So I sit on a rack awaiting my fate. I can sense her impatience while she paces in front of me. She stops several times and stares at me unfocused, as though looking out from a dream. Her face is soft and round, like a hamburger bun. She smiles at me, touches my crust lightly, bends over to smell me. I relax when she leaves the room.

I hear her on the phone. Then I panic, for she is inviting someone to come over and share me. I wish the poor woman

could understand our language, for I would tell her of her failure. Will she be embarrassed when, with anticipation flooding her senses, watched by her friend, she slices into me? The knife will struggle through my outer shell. She may flatten me if she isn't careful. Then she will see the air pockets.

As a white bread I am sweet but not deep. Yet I have feelings. And I carry the weight of centuries of bread knowledge, bread awareness. I know the ovens of our past as well as my own birthplace. We have a fondness for brick, for the artistry of a loaf made without controlled temperatures. Sometimes we think that bread's time has passed. People's lives move too quickly for us, and we do not travel well.

She's pacing again. I wonder how far away her friend lives. In ten minutes I will be ready for slicing.

My crust will make me difficult to eat. Perhaps they will dig out the soft flesh within. Perhaps the young woman's friend will be polite and eat me with feigned enjoyment and much butter. Oh, but worse, what if they can't recognize that I'm not a good loaf? If they have no concept of what bread should be?

I just realized I haven't seen her knife. I hope she has the right kind. The edge must be serrated. Pulling a loaf apart with the hands is a natural act, but mutilation with the wrong knife is agony. I fear I will be crushed beneath the clumsy pressure of an inexperienced hand and an improper blade.

What will happen to me, I wonder, after these initial slices, while I, still warm, am the center of their food world. All bread grows cold, changes in texture. A mediocre bread becomes worse. Will I sit, forgotten on the shelf until I turn rock-like? Or, into her too-small freezer to chill the life from me? Like trying to tell time from a sundial left in the shade, bread is useless if not eaten.

A knock at the door and she runs into the living room to open it. They kiss; he makes dutiful compliments about my appearance. I'm worried now. The first slice is always difficult. The waiting and then the cutting. Where is the knife? I must see it.

Good. They have a real bread knife. Twelve inches long with a seductively curved wooden handle. I palpitate. I wait. He takes it out of the cardboard packing, runs tap water over it, dries it. He's ready. The expectation is killing me. He hands it to her. No, she gives it back. Please, please, I'm ready. Let me feel it.

Finally, he begins the first cut. The arm comes down, knife edge presses my crust. Ah, he's experienced – he turns me on my side. I can't breath, I can't think. His hands, delicate, like those of an artist. I wish he would hold me forever. The new knife bites. I feel it. Back and forth, back and forth. He saws with precise strokes. Yes, yes. I feel it. I can't take it. I don't want it to end. Oh oh oh. I can't I don't I can't. Ahh. It's over now. They're eating. I can rest.

In the sky, a lone cloud slid across the blueness, borne along by the breezes of the young spring. The late afternoon sun shone just over the tops of the buildings. A man coming out of an apartment building squinted and probed his shirt pocket. He pulled out a pair of sunglasses and slid them over his eyes. On the way to the crosswalk he sidestepped a puddle of rusty water that had accumulated from a dripping fire hydrant.

Inside the Italian food store, Hawk Face watched as a boy in his mid-teens brought several fresh loaves of pumpernickel from the oven. She pushed a few whole wheat baguettes aside to make room. The pumpernickel thanked her for giving them

MAT COWARD

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a spot near the cash register; she didn't respond. She stood leaning with her elbows on the counter, staring at the cheeses and sausages in the glass case opposite her. Few customers had come in that afternoon; she kept looking at her watch. Her eyelids, colored a metallic blue, drooped over her pupils. Her chin kept bobbing as she fought off the afternoon drowsiness.

Behind her, the new pumpernickels, their voices purring like cats, chatted with their neighbors. They discussed the corn muffins in the basket on the counter; one loaf described them as sweet nothings of negligible nourishment. The foccacia, always pushing their pedigree, spoke in haughty tones about the quality of the mushrooms baked into their tops, while the prosciutto bread, sated by its own flavor, said nothing.

Hawk Face continued to stare at her watch, and without lifting her head called out once to the fat man behind the cheese counter, "I'm so damn bored I almost wish a bus would drop a load of tourists at our door."

He nodded as he prepared a party tray. A woman with a green scarf over her head came in with a young girl; Hawk Face stood up straight and smiled, her first smile of the day.

"Either that or ice cream, but only ice cream with chocolate chunks," the girl said to her mother. "Not chocolate ice cream. Or maybe an apple turnover *and* ice cream."

"I'll get you something sweet, but you can't have it till after dinner."

"Fine Momma, but I don't want eggplant again. We've been having eggplant all this long winter, and I'm sick of it. Sick of it, sick of it."

The man with the sunglasses entered; he dropped the glasses back into his shirt pocket. The breads greeted him by name as he glanced at them. He smiled, but walked to the back of the store, where he selected cartons of milk and orange juice. When he returned to the bread, the struan was singing the part of Tamino from *The Magic Flute*.

"O endless night! Wilt though never pass? When shall my eyes behold the light?"

The pumpernickel, in chorus, answered, "Soon, young man, or never!"

While the woman with the scarf paid for a foccacia and an apple turnover, the girl stared at the bread and giggled. Her mother and Hawk Face apparently couldn't hear the singing, which was so loud now it would have drowned out their comments about the weather. The girl began humming along with the bread, and continued humming as her mother led her out.

The man stood looking at the bread, which had stopped singing. He idly played with a strand of his dark hair. The semolina bread whispered to its neighbor that they knew the man would pick one of them; the struan, in its commanding tone, told them to hush.

"Well, order something already, before I fall asleep," Hawk Face said. She smiled.

The man smiled back. He continued to stand before the bread, which began asking in turn, "Choose me. What about me? Am I the right flavor? Choose me." The semolina glowed as he asked for one of them.

The man left the store. Hawk Face turned to watch him through the window as he crossed the street; the remaining loaves resumed the singing. For a moment as she watched, he paused to allow a taxi to turn in front of him. With a pile of baguettes between her and the window, his head seemed to be connected to the bread. The loaves became his body. She shook her head as though emerging from a dream.

Robert Wexler is a graduate of Clarion West. His short stories have appeared in a few magazines, and this is his first appearance in TTA. He lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

SUCCESS . . . AND HOW TO AVOID IT

There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

1. Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book
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Mat Coward's **Success . . . And How To Avoid It** is different. Combining humour with practical information, and based firmly on hard-won personal knowledge, it's a tonic, an antidote, a survival kit for every writer who is fed up with being told how easy it is to write yourself a fortune.

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Other writers' books say "You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules." This book says "You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place. Still, if you are determined to embark on this foolish quest, you'd better read this first." If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

Success . . . And How To Avoid It — at last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading.

Electric Darkness

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While we remain haunted by particular scenes from films, colliding cadences of light, sound and atmosphere, the human face has always existed at the heart of cinema memory, and there have always been iconic stars. The females were usually modelled around ideals of sex, beauty, vulnerability and occasional feistiness, the males on strength, control, leadership, sex and machismo. When mythic men showed their equality with each other by bonding into buddy-friendship or becoming respected enemies, we got those two-fisted tales of honour so beloved by serious critics, tales that reached their zenith with John Woo's hardboiled hitmen-with-consciences.

The female cinema version of male-bonding is sisterhood, a mystical state existing in films like [illegible] *Practical Magic* and dozens of other films that presuppose women of all ages and creeds share secret suffering that can never be known by men, in the same way that the Victorians assumed females were prone to insanity through some mysterious and vaguely unsanitary link between hysteria and the womb. After a decade of feminism which produced a by-product of gutsy leading roles for women in films such as *Norma Rae*, *Silkwood*, *Mask* and *The China Syndrome*, sisterhood films came as something of a disappointment, depoliticising and watering down the hard-earned victories of the past into personal growth sagas that featured women eating cake and crying together a lot. Those women who were not part of the sisterhood had to content themselves with being voracious bitches (Linda Fiorentino in *The Last Seduction*, Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*) or she-demons (Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*).

Men, on the other hand, could be anything they wanted, and to a large extent still can. Women play the detectives' wives, not the detectives, and get the scene at the beginning and the end of the film in which they are first found preparing breakfast and later seen hugging their returning heroes with a child in their arms. At first female stars were cheesecake, set dressing, designed to make a man look and feel good. Things changed in the thirties; screwball comedies allowed women to give as good as they got. The husband-and-wife writing team of Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon tackled the sex war in liberal comedies like *Adam's Rib*, allowing the sexy, sassy and intelligent Katherine Hepburn to score for women everywhere, and even threw in sympathetic gay characters. In the forties, war forced a retrograde attitude on women. They became painted dolls once more, with Betty Grable and Alice Faye flouncing in musicals or sobbing gently into hankies. Carmen Miranda represented a grotesque nadir of femininity, an intelligent woman transformed into a ridiculous object, to be painted like a gurning drag queen and decorated like a Christmas tree.

Male iconography was never really about cheesecake. While Monroe stood over the subway grating in a league of her own, only Brando, sweating in a dirty torn vest, competed in an overtly sexual manner – but he was understood to be stupid. Virility and intelligence were rare partners. Men were depicted in westerns standing against the sun, legs astride, eyes narrowed, chin stubbled. Later they leaned on car bonnets to steady their gun hands. Now, silliest of all, they fly sideways through the air in long leather coats amidst orgiastic explosions, both guns blazing. The pumped-up plastic action figure bodies of Schwarzennegger and Stallone were replaced by the equally peculiar slow-motion-walking techniques of John Travolta and Bruce Willis, slightly gentler, slightly more caring, but men who could still handle the rough stuff and narrow their eyes with the best of them.

The Quatermass Experiment

It's often forgotten that Hammer rose to success less on its iconic reworking of the Dracula myth than on a middle-aged American (the ageing, drinking Brian Donlevy) in a shabby raincoat and trilby, who was rather easier for Englishmen to identify with. The immense popularity of Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* series began on as a six-part television drama and resulted in three feature films. Quatermass himself was a grumpy, unlikeable professor attached to the government in some capacity as a space scientist. In *The Quatermass Experiment*, his rocket returns to earth crash-landing in Wimbledon (!) with a tragically infected astronaut on board. This corrupting alienation

from within was explored more deeply in *Quatermass 2*, in which full-scale alien invasion is fought against body-snatchers who have poisoned the highest circles of British government. In the third we go deeper still, to find an ancient alien force (uncovered in a London tube station) that fatally exists at the very heart of our genetic makeup. Several things remain eerie and striking about the first two films; the darkened post-war city streets are deserted and ripe for haunting. Most exterior scenes take place at night, on underlit backroads and bomb sites. An air of post-war melancholy and an attitude of Little Englandism, as bumptious officials get in the way of progress, infest the stories. In particular, the second film shows a great distrust of being instructed from above, as government yes-men tell Quatermass that they know what they are doing, creating artificial foodstuffs (so that's all right, then) when in fact the entire country is being flogged off to alien forces. To this end, Quatermass remains a great British anti-icon, not just because he is shabby and unstarlike, but because he displays a consistent suspicion of authoritarianism when most male icons are themselves authoritarians.

Certainly, tales of honour among gangsters, for all their adoration by serious critics, have deeply conservative, reactionary attitudes. Woo's exciting tales of male bonding in films like *Hard Boiled*, *The Killer* and *A Better Tomorrow* gave him a credibility that he debased in an ill-advised series of ludicrous Hollywood blockbusters. The ultra-iconic Clint Eastwood, so idolised by Time Out critics, was the seventies' scourge of 'otherness', attacking scummy foreigners, punishing queers, ignoring women. By the time we reached the image of an insanely overacting Nicholas Cage whipping out gold revolvers before tumbling into a jet engine in *Face/Off*, the icon of the mythic tough guy was revealed not just as a pose but a sham, and an absurd one at that. Iconography returned to a less ironic, more youthful form with Keanu Reeves's *Matrix* character, the perfect icon for techno-geeks, and gentler with the doe-eyed young stars of *Lord of the Rings*, one of the few effects epics of recent years that refused to insult the intelligence of mature audiences, and for which crime, naturally, it was denied any decent Oscars.

Teenagers still cut out images of gorgeous women and strong men for their bedroom walls, but it doesn't pay to be so knowing that you spoil the belief. Arnold Schwarzennegger proved more than happy to send up the power-image provided by his absurdly exaggerated body, but doing so has left him in an uncomfortable filmic limbo without a viable exit strategy. Cage, on the other hand, becomes more like a sinister granite gargoyle with each passing film. You watch him in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, hunching over Penelope Cruz like Nosferatu, and wonder why the director didn't see how unappealing his male star was.

No such mistake is made with Hugh Grant. Hugh sticks to doing what he does best: being very, very English. Possibly the whitest actor to star in British films since the war, he acts as an idealised fantasy partner for a particular category of starstruck women who like their men naughty but nice, and he's genuinely funny in *About a Boy*, even though those glottal stops used to indicate a working class background sound memorised. But can an icon simply be nice?

It is hard to overestimate the effect that James Bond iconography had on cinemagoers. The series may have started with *Dr No*, but it was with *Goldfinger* that 007 truly became a phenomenon, and an icon for the times. One remembers the gilded Shirley Eaton, Pussy Galore, Oddjob and the Fort Knox countdown (destined to be the first of far too many bomb deadlines), but when fans talk of Sean Connery representing the only serious Bond, they conveniently ignore the fact that 007 was first spotted in *Goldfinger* with a stuffed seagull attached to his head, or that he talked flippantly about heroin-soaked bananas before the opening credits even rolled. In fact, after he has blown up a drugs empire filled with cartoonish barrels of nitroglycerine, had a fag, snogged a semi-nude woman and fried an attacker in his bath, it seems highly appropriate that camp icon Shirley Bassey should start screaming out the title song. Bond was never serious, always manpower pushed to the nth degree, which is why his women needed ludicrous identities and pumped-up sexuality to compete. It is a rule, of course, that no matter how old an icon becomes, he is usually allowed the embrace of a hot young woman. This reached levels of horror in the late Roger Moore 007 films.

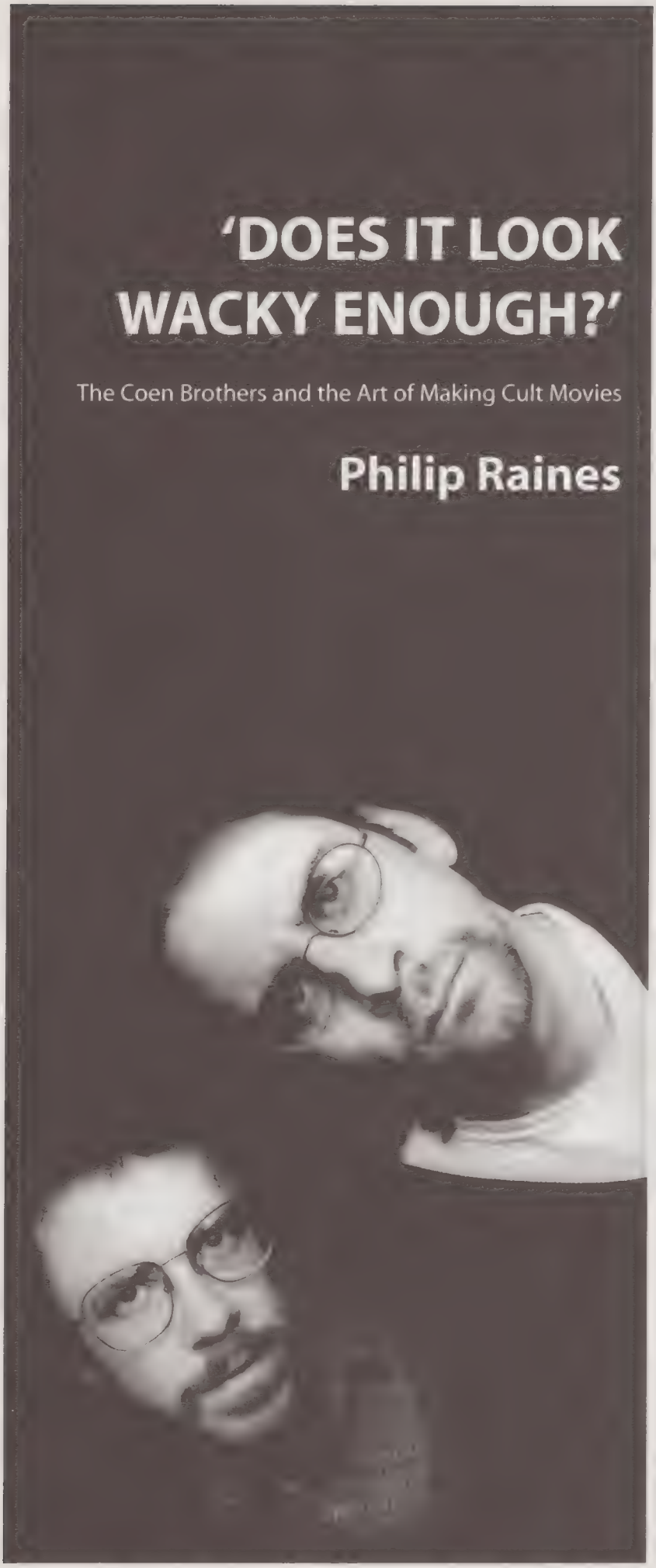
But to a rationed postwar nation for whom a roulette wheel represented exoticism and a cigarette case sophistication, Connery could hardly fail to become an icon, and was aided by his backing team of canny American producers, composer John Barry and the extraordinary sets of Ken Adam, whose dazzling steel ellipses seemingly quadrupled the size of every set. The full extent of Barry's haunting instrumentation is revealed on the bootleg CD of *Goldfinger*, which is simultaneously brassy, lush and spare. Bond's swinging London slotted into the mood of *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*, both of which should have reached the big screen at that time, but were waylaid in funding tangles. So linked were they to the national mood that Patrick Macnee resorted to making a joke about Cathy Gale being off on a secret mission at Fort Knox in an *Avengers* episode.

American films have always provided audiences with the best icons, and a handful of classic stars-as-symbols (Dean, Monroe) are still with us. These days icons are rather one-note and humourless (Tom Cruise, Ethan Hawke, Russell Crowe), stoic (Ben Affleck, Josh Hartnett), statuesque (Angelina Jolie, following a long line of amazonian women) or hidden behind cool shades (Wesley Snipes, Cruise again). Vulnerability and complexity of character are unfashionable for all but a few stars like Gwyneth Paltrow, Drew Barrymore and Kevin Spacey. For future icons we should perhaps look to Japan and India, whose stars recognise the importance of striking exaggerated poses of extreme glamour. Long may they remain on the bedroom walls of the world.

above: **Basic instinct**

below: **The Lord of the Rings**

Christopher Fowler



Have you noticed how many directors are brothers?

Consider the last ten years. Out of Hollywood, there has been Albert and Allan Hughes and their nu-ghetto flicks (*Menace II Society*, *From Hell*), the Wachowskis successfully mixing together Hong Kong and Playstation (*The Matrix*, the forthcoming *The Matrix Reloaded*) and Bobby and Peter Farrelly updating the spirit of Carry On for a new generation (*There's Something About Mary*, *Shallow Hal*). In art-house circles, there is the Belgian pair Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne (*La Promesse*, *Rosetta*) and, of course, the Quay Brothers (profiled in TTA29). Sisters in film-making are less common – the closest is Jane and Anna Campion, who wrote, but did not direct, *Holy Smoke* together – but that's not unusual; it is still an industry with far fewer women than men.

What makes this interesting is not just the family connections. First of all, it is a strangely recent phenomenon. Actor clans have been pretty common throughout film history – from the Marx Brothers to the Baldwins – but for directors, we have to go back to the 1950s and 1960s, the Boulting brothers and the heyday of British social satire for any comparable example. Why have all these talented brothers come along now? Maybe the reason is cultural demographics: while Mom and Dad were out working, baby-boom, latch-key kids grew up in front of the TV, absorbing film culture and planning their own mini-movies out in the backyard with the family dog, some roller skates and a Super 8 camera. From this pool of super-saturated film geeks, it shouldn't be too surprising that some of the brothers turn out to be gifted duos, so used to working together that they carry on making movies with better props in bigger backyards – indeed, most of these brothers in film are twins.

Then there is the kind of movies brothers make – all these film-makers have an unmistakable sense of style. Every one of their films has a cinematic watermark. Whether it is the Farrellys' ability to raise the stakes on bad taste in movies or the Quay Brothers' disturbing animation of toys and clutter, each pair has a distinctive imprint that sets them apart as trailblazers in their respective genres. They make *neat* movies. 'Neat' is as apt a concept as it is tricky to define – a quality that's deliberately slippery, a way of saying that while we don't know what's going on in these movies, we recognize immediately that we're watching something different, something that blows through our heads like a breeze through a stuffy cinema.

The first of this new wave of sibling duos – and probably the best known – are the Coens. The Coen Brothers – and it is hard to think of Ethan and Joel Coen as separate individuals – have made nine movies together and have never made movies apart. They are the quintessential independent film-makers, as much in terms of their cinematic vision as their determination to operate at arms' length from the Hollywood system for as long as they can. While John Cassavettes and John Sayles have the better claim to be the grandfathers of US independent cinema, it is hard to imagine the current army of kids with video cameras and nickel-and-dime budgets marching on Sundance if there'd been no Coens. They have won at Cannes, collected Oscar nominations and yet still make direct-to-

cult movies.

Like the best cult movies, the Coen Brothers' pictures – and there is an old-fashioned quality about the Coens that make the use of the word 'pictures' seem appropriate – take place in a fully-breathing, idiosyncratic world two steps removed from our own. It doesn't matter whether it is the rural Deep South in the 1930s or post-WW2 suburban California or modern-day, small-town Minnesota, this is all Coen-world: a world where Road Runner rides a Harley and the Odyssey takes place in Mississippi, where the greatest playwright of his generation can't write a simple wrestling flick, men will sell their souls for hula hoops and bowling is more important than just about anything. And like the best cinematic worlds, while we can take any of the details out of a Coen movie and raise an eyebrow at how absurd they look, once the lights go down, in some cracked way, the details all come together to make perfect sense.

Joel and Ethan Coen were raised on movies. One critic described their first feature, *Blood Simple*, as having been made by "guys who spent most of their lives watching movies, indiscriminately, both in theatres and on TV, and for whom, mostly by osmosis, the vocabulary and grammar of film has become a kind of instinctive language." Born a few years apart (Joel in 1954, Ethan in 1957), the two drifted from a childhood in a comfortable Jewish community of Minneapolis – yes, making Super 8 movies in their backyard – into the film industry. While Ethan wrote a thesis on Wittgenstein and scripts for *Cagney and Lacey*, Joel studied film and worked as assistant editor on Sam Raimi's schlock horror classic *The Evil Dead*. The association with Raimi has been a strong one for the Coens down the years: they scripted his slapstick comedy *Crimewave*, and he worked with them on *The Hudsucker Proxy*. More than that though, Raimi was an important role model when they were getting started. Just as Raimi did with *The Evil Dead*, the Coens made their first movie on a shoestring, hawking a trailer of it around small businesses in Minnesota to get financial backing. Their outlook is similar as well: Raimi's black comedy approach to horror has powerful echoes in the way the Coens reinvigorated film noir. Even the title of their first movie is a tip of the hat – it is one of the characters in *Evil Dead 2* who says "Crazy buck's gone *blood simple*."

Blood Simple (1984) was an astonishing, flawed debut. Both smart-aleck and reverential in its reimagining of classic noir, the picture is a convoluted assemblage of familiar narrative elements, as if the brothers were trying to boil every James M Cain novel down to their essence – a tangle of plots, counterplots and crimes that backfire disastrously, involving a pair of adulterous lovers (Frances McDormand and John Getz), the woman's murderous husband (Dan Hedaya) and a double-crossing private detective (M Emmett Walsh at his sleaziest best). Taking place in a present-day, bleak Texan landscape, *Blood Simple* may feel like a movie that can't make up its mind whether to wink at us or insist we take its genre pretensions seriously. But what is clear throughout is the Coen's love of film-making. The camera moves with cinematic zest, like something that's been let out after a long incarceration, and the movie is peppered with memorable details and brilliant tableaux, including a premature burial and a startling climax (in which the rampaging detective perforates a wall with gunfire to free a hand pinned by a kitchen knife). These are scenes that are not only comic and gruesome at the same time, but in their easy blend of styles, seem to suggest that a film can mix hilarity and terror without giving the audience emotional whiplash. This was to become one of the Coens' trademarks.

Blood Simple

The moderate critical and commercial success of *Blood Simple* guaranteed that the Coens could fund their future pictures without having to go door-to-door. Yet even though the money has often come from mainstream Hollywood, the brothers have been able to make the movies they want to make with an almost charmed absence of interference. The Coens have used their unique freedom to create films that, like *Blood Simple*, are bizarre cocktails of different genres. Few directors have mined film history as vigorously as the Coen Brothers. In all their pictures, there are nods to other movies, little jokes that always threaten to undermine the story, like sniggering know-it-alls whispering in our ears while we're trying to concentrate on the screen – but somehow the Coens

have always been able to veer away from pastiche. Their talent is alchemical, transforming their encyclopaedic knowledge of a century of Hollywood into films that wrestle, tickle and argue with cinematic genres while never failing to entertain.

In fact, the pattern is so strong that the easiest – and most misleading – way to describe their films is simply to cite the style(s). Take *Miller's Crossing* (1990), for example – their third picture was their 'gangster movie'. The film's love of the gangster flicks of the 1930s and 1940s glows in every scene: from the perfectly-pitched patter of the characters to the procession of genre stereotypes through the storyline to the lovingly twisted narrative of wheeling and dealing in a war between Irish and Italian mobs. Gabriel Byrne plays Tom Reagan, lieutenant to the city's ruling kingpin Leo (Albert Finney), who in order to save Leo's empire embarks on a convoluted dance of apparent and real betrayals that resonates with all the Bogart, Cagney and Raft movies we can just about recall seeing on TV on far-off Saturday afternoons.

If it was only a pure recreation of style, *Miller's Crossing* would be a delight. The dialogue crackles, the actors tackle their parts with gusto (including, as well as Byrne and Finney, Jon Polito as an almost-civilized Italian mobster and John Turturro as a wonderfully fickle rat-fink) and there are plenty of the beautifully choreographed, showpiece scenes in which the Coens excel. But the film is not simply a love letter by the Coens to a certain kind of movie.

top: **The Hudsucker Proxy**
bottom: **The Big Lebowski**

Beneath the genre trappings, this is a potent story about how we will do just about anything for love, including sacrificing those very qualities that we treasure most in ourselves. For all the film's hard-boiled surface, there is something undeniably moving at the end when Tom, having traded his beloved dignity and panache for Leo's survival, looks on longingly as his beloved master walks away into the forest.

Another example of their stylistic games is their fifth picture, the genre this time being screwball comedy (with a liberal dose of Frank Capra). Set in a 1959-going-on-1939, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1993) traces the spectacular rise and fall of Norville Barnes, the kind of sweet-natured, innocent hero regularly played by James Stewart and Gary Cooper (and Tim Robbins, here). Norville is the inventor of the Extruded Plastic Dingus, or hula hoop – 'You know, for kids', as he explains at every opportunity to anyone who will listen. Going from mailroom menial to company president in a single leap, he becomes a pawn (the proxy of the title) in the plans of Sydney J Mussburger (Paul Newman) to take over Hudsucker Industries. But while the movie's stew of satire, fantasy and romance is consistently entertaining and the production benefits from the biggest budget the Coens have had to date, this remains the weakest Coen Brothers picture – precisely *because* it is so knowingly derivative. The film winks at the audience so much that it comes over as a nervous tick. We are so busy tagging the clever references – from Jennifer Jason Leigh's impersonation of Katherine Hepburn as a fast-talking reporter and the film's love interest to the self-conscious effort to remake *It's A Wonderful Life* in the film's climax – that we almost forget to watch the movie.

All the Coen Brothers' movies are comedies of one sort or the other, and more often than not, that sort is screwball. Perhaps the best illustration of this is *Raising Arizona* (1987), the picture they made after *Blood Simple* and the one that made their reputation. Drawing on influences as diverse as Loony Tune cartoons and Sergio Leone westerns, *Raising Arizona* charges through its running time like the Road Runner on amphetamines. From its whirlwind prologue charting the courtship between Hi, an easy-going small-time criminal (played with typical over-the-top fervour by Nicholas Cage), and Ed, a police photographer (Holly Hunter, in her first major role), during his successive arrests, through to Hi's climactic vision of his and Ed's future life together, the movie fizzes with energy. Driven by their desire for a family, Hi and Ed's kidnapping of one of five quintuplets – reasoning that with so many, their parents wouldn't miss one little baby – sets in motion an avalanche of events that sweeps up two escaped convicts (John Goodman and William Forsythe in a great double act), the local king of cut-price furniture and a bounty-hunting Lone Biker of the Apocalypse.

Raising Arizona is quintessentially wacky. 'Wacky' isn't usually an endearing description. It suggests a comic style that is wilfully madcap, someone trying so hard to be funny that it is frankly embarrassing. Yet wackiness works for the Coen Brothers. As in all their movies, the dialogue in *Raising Arizona* is sharp and full of sparkling one-liners. The film is a directory of different forms of movie humour: from the slapstick (as in the

chase sequence where Hi tries to rob a supermarket while picking up diapers), to the satirical (with the Coens' take on traditional American family values), to the genuinely absurd (as in the arresting image of a pair of robbers taking a baby on a bank heist). It is 'wacky' in the best kind of way: throwing together elements that appear to be completely incompatible, almost nonsensical in their juxtaposition, and yet finding the secret links that make them coherent.

They pulled off the same trick with their last but one picture, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in 2000. The film could almost be a case study in how the Coens tell a joke. It is a classic what-if: what if Homer's Odyssey took place in 1930s rural Mississippi, with Odysseus and his crew replaced by a dapper, brylcreemed George Clooney and two fellow convicts (John Turturro and Tim Nelson), on the run from a chain gang so he can stop his wife remarrying. The joke isn't original – Howard Waldrop beat the Coens to the punch with his Hercules-in-the-Deep-South novella 'A Dozen Tough Jobs' (and by calling one of the movie's characters Waldrip, one wonders if the Coens were acknowledging the influence) – but then in comedy, it isn't the originality of the punchline that really matters, just the way we tell the joke. The Coen Brothers use their re-invention of Greek myth as a Mack Sennett comedy to show the myths that underpin modern America, whether it is the myth of technological progress, the origins of rock 'n' roll or the glamour of outlaws like Baby Face Nelson. It is a joke told with a supremely straight face, evident in an attention to period detail and historical background that resulted in a Grammy award for the movie's bluegrass soundtrack. And like the best comedians, the Coen Brothers know when to stop being funny and knock out their audience with moments of pure cinematic power, as in the movie's epic climax with the flooding of the Tennessee Valley.

What makes their comedy work though is that at heart, Coen Brothers' pictures are moral, often political fables. In all their movies, they side with the little guys against the Great Men, showing a consistent contempt for those who can't appreciate the small things in life – perhaps no more so than in their 1997 picture, *The Big Lebowski*. The film is their tribute to Raymond Chandler, Los Angeles, the slacker lifestyle of contemporary America – and the joys of bowling. The film's unlikely hero is the Dude – 'the man for his time', as the narrator says at the start – a retired '60s radical who spends his days smoking dope and bowling with buddies, Walter (John Goodman) and Donny (Steve Buscemi). After being mistaken for someone with the same name – the Big Lebowski of the title, a crippled, rich industrialist and self-made Great Man (David Huddlestone) – the Dude (a permanently-dishevelled Jeff Bridges) is pulled into a bottomless plot of kidnapping and blackmail involving porn stars, German nihilists and avant-garde artists. *The Big Lebowski* has the usual Coen Brother filmic references (like the Dude's Busby-Berkeley-goes-bowling dream sequence) and some lovely comic touches (not least John Turturro's cameo as a pumped-up, Mexican bowling stud), but what stands out from the movie is its idealism. Against an early 1990s backdrop of America acting alpha-male in the Gulf War, the Dude's laid-back approach stands out from the behaviour of those around him, whether it is the disastrous aggressiveness of Walter or the phoney posturings of the Big Lebowski himself. If we want to find heroes, don't look centre stage, but at the little fellow at the corner of the screen.

top: **Miller's Crossing**
bottom: **O Brother, Where Art Thou?**

The Coen Brothers have a fond spot for the small bit parts in their pictures. Their movies are full of quirky individuals – the Coens rarely put anyone on screen, no matter how long for, without trying to make them memorable. In their casting, they have always been drawn to what were once called character actors, people who are – as someone in *Fargo* describes Steve Buscemi – 'funny looking'. Even when working with big Hollywood stars like Nicholas Cage or George Clooney, the Coens have always de-glamourized them to the point where they are just as eccentric as everyone else in the cast. It may be the reason why the Coens have worked with a fairly stable rota of actors. The careers of people like Steve Buscemi, John Goodman and John Turturro are inextricably tied to the Coen Brothers – legally so in the case of Frances McDormand, as she's married to Joel. Indeed, the family atmosphere extends to the rest of their crew. In common with other cult directors like David Lynch or Tim Burton, the Coens frequently work with the same people: for example, Barry Sonnenfeld (now a big-name director in his own right) shot their first three movies, Roger Deakins their next six

and Carter Burwell soundtracked all nine pictures.

In the same way that the Coens have lined up alongside life's bit part actors, the brothers have also defended the Common Man's tastes against high-falutin' intellectualism in their pictures. They once quoted Raymond Chandler, 'All good art is entertainment and anyone who says differently is a stuffed shirt and juvenile at the art of living', and their movies consistently aim to put the axiom into practice. Still, while they always claim to be populists at heart and want to make movies that gravitated towards the mainstream, their defence of popular art has always been self-contradictory. For example, take the title of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, another Coens' wink to film geeks everywhere. It is the name of the earnest, intellectual movie that the film-maker in Preston Sturges's 1941 comedy *Sullivan's Travels* is going to make before he finally sees the light and decides to dedicate himself to making pictures that will make people laugh. The title is a good joke, a clever apologia for films that aspire to be nothing more than entertainment – but how many ordinary movie-goers would get the reference? Or for that matter, any of the references in their pictures? The Coens have always been too clever for their own good.

But the tension between their low-brow philosophies and high-brow talents is often creative. For one thing, it produced one of their finest movies, *Barton Fink* (1991). Their tale of how the toast of Broadway – Barton Fink, played by John Turturro as someone whose writer's block seems to verge on physical constipation – comes a cropper in Hollywood on the eve of WW2 is a terrific study of both the agony and the arrogance of the creative process. Fink sits in his sweltering room in the decrepit Hotel Earle, waiting for inspiration for the wrestling B-movie he has been commissioned to write as the wallpaper peels off in strips. Utterly convinced that he can speak for the Common Man, as he repeatedly tells his neighbour, a travelling salesman called Charlie Meadows (John Goodman), Fink is completely unprepared for the real world when it violently crashes in on him and he finds himself framed for a string of murders. The movie exquisitely details Fink's dual predicament – resolving the murder mystery, finishing the wrestling script – as he rubs up against the fundamental coarseness of Hollywood and its capacity for destroying genuine talents like the drunken writer WP Mayhew (John Maloney as a thinly-veiled William Faulkner).

The movie was a bite of the Hollywood hand that been paying the Coens' bills all these years – one reason why it may have appealed to European sensibilities and won the Palme d'Or in Cannes that year. But it was also a warning against the hubris of any popular artist – including themselves, I'd like to think. Every writer, film-maker or musician claiming to make Art that captures the essence of what is to be human should be made to watch the climax of *Barton Fink*, where Charlie Meadows, finally revealed as a serial killer, stalks Fink down a burning hotel corridor, bellowing, 'I'll show you the life of the mind!'.

Still, hubris doesn't seem to be something the Coens suffer from unduly. In front of the camera, they remain relatively anonymous, preferring to stay out of the public eye for the most part. After nine movies, it is still difficult to work out who does what before and during filming: usually Joel is credited with actual directing, Ethan with producing and both with writing. But anecdotal accounts suggest that they work together on all aspects of the movie: Joel might have a bigger role in visualizing the movie, Ethan in scripting the dialogue (he has a published book of short stories under his own name), but it is not easy delineating responsibilities. It is as if they are two halves of a single person, an impression reinforced by the two of them hiding behind the pseudonym they regularly use for their joint editing work, 'Roderick Jaynes'. Created as an in-joke, it almost rebounded on them when Mr Jaynes was nominated for an Oscar by an unsuspecting Academy for his work on *Fargo*.

Roderick Jaynes's Oscar nomination wasn't the only prank the brothers pulled out of *Fargo* (1996). The movie opens with the following statement: 'THIS IS A TRUE STORY. The events depicted in this film took place in Minneapolis in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.'

The brothers kept a straight face in the publicity interviews for the film, insisting that the picture was based on real events that happened in their home town. They were convincing enough for a Japanese woman to travel to northern Dakota sev-

top: **Fargo**
bottom: **The Man Who Wasn't There**

eral years later to search the wintry landscape for a briefcase of $1 million hidden by one of the film's characters (she subsequently died of exposure). The story is, of course, complete fabrication, one of the few occasions when the Coens have winked at their audience outside the frames on screen. But paradoxically, *Fargo* is also one of their few movies that doesn't feel assembled from other films. For once, stepping outside of their world of movies, the brothers had fashioned something wholly original.

Fargo is another in their line of comedy noirs, but they have never bettered the balance between humour and horror. It is one of their most understated pictures – from the muted colours of the bleak, snow-covered terrain to the odd, clipped voices of the taciturn inhabitants – and the lack of cinematic pyrotechnics highlights the strength of the acting and writing. The film revolves around a botched kidnapping and blackmail – the familiar Coen storyline – this time orchestrated by a second-hand car dealer, Jerry Lundegaard (William H Macy), who hires a pair of criminals (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) to snatch his wife so his rich father-in-law can be tapped for a high ransom. The centre of the movie though is Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand, in an Oscar-winning role), the pregnant, level-headed sheriff investigating the murders caused by the kidnapping. She wanders through the movie relentlessly cheerful, as astounded by the casual violence of the criminals as by the inability of someone like Lundegaard to make due with the small comforts that make up life. There is a terrific scene at the end where Marge is sitting in bed with her husband, trying to reassure him that his commission to design a 3¢ stamp for the Post Office isn't trivial: "People need the little stamps," she tells him. A more heartfelt expression of the Coen Brothers' own philosophy won't be found.

Jerry Lundegaard's dissatisfaction with his lot on life is echoed in their most recent picture, *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Billy Bob Thornton's supremely stoic barber, Ed Crane, acts out of the same restlessness for a better life, and like Lundegaard, his blackmailing plot – threatening to make public the adulterous affair of Ed's wife, Doris (Frances McDormand), with her boss, Big Dave (James Gandolfini) – spins out of control, leading to murder, imprisonment and the threat of the electric chair. But *The Man Who Wasn't There* is a very different movie from *Fargo*. Almost a formal film-making exercise, this time the Coens' what-if is what if Hitchcock had directed one of James M Cain noir novels. With Deakins's severe black-and-white photography and its faithful recreation of suburban American in the wake of WW2, *The Man Who Wasn't There* feels less like a real movie than a bet the brothers might have made with themselves. But unlike their other film-buff-fest, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, this is not simply an anal commentary on cinematic history. As in all the Coens' movies, the script transcends its genre slumming, creating a portrait of a man struggling (and failing) to discover something beyond the internal and external limits imposed on his life: effectively, the essence of film noir. In its climax, despite its tireless post-modernist style, viewers will still catch their breaths with the movie's almost spiritual resolution of poor Ed's incapacity to be fully 'there' in this life.

Barton Fink

The Man Who Wasn't There highlights the key tension that runs through their work. The Coens make movies that explicitly recognize their movieness. All their pictures feel as if they have been grown in an artificial hothouse, fed by the compost of the whole of Hollywood's history. In fact, recognition is one of the main pleasures in watching their films. But the joy of a Coens movie isn't just the craft with which they do magic tricks with cinematic tropes – for anyone who loves the escapism that cinema offers, it's the feeling of almost vindication, the proof that movies constructed out of other movies can be as believable and fully-formed as films that set out to engage with the 'real world'.

But it is a limited vision, one that appeals primarily to audiences as steeped in movie culture as themselves, and like Ed Crane, the Coens clearly aspire to something beyond. They are continually undone by their own cleverness: by drawing attention to the fictiveness of their movies, by overseasoning their stories with film references, and most of all, by trying to build sophisticated, powerful tales from what's left after they have deconstructed their genres.

Fargo showed they can do it, that they can become 'serious' film-makers without wincing at the idea that originality can be a worthy goal in its own right. But if they do ever pull this off again, it will be more by accident than design. After all, the Coens have made a career out of not taking themselves too seriously: if they started now, someone's bound to sit them down in front of *Barton Fink*.

Still, if the mark of great film-makers is the ability to take us into cinematic landscapes that feel completely fresh, the Coens, for all their refusal to use new materials, have created one of the most distinctive imaginary worlds of recent American cinema. And like the best cult movies, their pictures work because they are rooted in a sense of family. Just as many cult films are made by 'families' of technicians and actors who have worked with each other many times before, the movies themselves create secret communities of the elect among their small audiences. Cult movies are all about belonging, and not surprisingly, the movies we remember most are the ones made by the kind of people who understand the importance of belonging.

Like brothers, for instance.

FILMOGRAPHY

As writers/directors:

1984 **Blood Simple**
1987 **Raising Arizona**
1990 **Miller's Crossing**
1991 **Barton Fink**
1993 **The Hudsucker Proxy**
1996 **Fargo**
1997 **The Big Lebowski**
2000 **O Brother, Where Art Thou?**
2001 **The Man Who Wasn't There**

As writers only:

1985 **Crimewave** (directed by Sam Raimi)

She stood against the column like a ribald caryatid.

Updike sat and watched her through the restaurant window distractedly rolling his sensitive new fingertips through a gritty spill of sodium chloride crystals scattered across the tabletop.

He saw how people appraised her as they passed by on the street or tripped up the steps to the museum. It didn't seem to matter what form she took she always managed to look as good as they got.

She looked across the road and caught his eye. She lifted an eyebrow slightly, her mouth a tight line. She glanced once more along the street then must have decided Willis wasn't going to show because she stepped away from the column and crossed the road directly in front of a bulk liquid hauler. The vehicle slammed on its brakes and blared a sawtooth-throated claxon.

Ashlin tossed her shaggy, shining black hair in wounding indifference and stalked across to the pavement outside the restaurant, short white skirt fluttering about her long, strong thighs.

She pushed into the restaurant and sidled down the aisle, stepping over the mostly pointless looking consumables bagged up around the feet of the other diners. She stood and looked down at Updike, slender tanned arms crossed beneath her breasts.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded

"I'm not staring *at* you, Ashlin, I'm staring *with* you. Sit down and take a load off your indignation."

Ashlin slid into the booth opposite him. "That fucking little man with the magazines would *not* leave me alone." Ashlin jerked her thumb in the direction of somewhere vaguely outside. She swung her legs apart and lifted one foot up so that her heel rested on the tabletop. A man sitting to the right of Updike was afforded an unexpected glimpse of her female characteristics plumply cupped in flimsy cotton underthings. It seemed to confuse him because when Updike glanced across at him he became engrossed in his menu again even though Updike had heard him recently order a full meal and drinks from it.

"He kept yelling 'Bigger shoes! Bigger shoes!' at me. What's wrong with these ones, Updike? Eh? Bigger fucking shoes! In the end I had to threaten to force them into his arse parts if he didn't fuck off out of my face."

Updike narrowed his eyes and thought about explaining the homeless situation to her but thought better of it. It would probably only compromise her already strained tolerance for these creatures and anyway he wasn't the cultural expert, Willis was and he wasn't there.

"You smile with your face on this planet, Ashlin," Updike said, "conceal your birth canal."

Ashlin rearranged herself in a more appropriate norms-and-values way, yanking her skirt down to mid-thigh. She nodded towards his empty plate. "What'd you have?"

"Combination special with anchovies."

"Any good?"

"It was all right."

They looked at each other. Ashlin laughed tightly. "Come on Updike, I've warned you about overwhelming me with your sophisticated post-repast discourse. You know how I struggle."

Updike frowned and looked over Ashlin's shoulder as the restaurant door banged open.

Ashlin must have seen the look on Updike's face because she swung round before he could say anything. "Oh, Lord, look at the state of it!" she cried, "Don't let it sit next to me."

Willis looked around for them, saw Updike and waved heartily. He barged down the aisle, his bright orange, crispy-looking tracksuit bottoms puffing around his waist as if each stride briefly inflated them. He wore a cream-coloured vest and had a lime green jacket thrown over his shoulder. On his feet were sandals of some kind. No socks.

He fetched up next to their table and threw his arms wide apart. His jacket flicked the head of a man sitting in a booth in front of theirs, who turning saw what he was dealing with and decided, wisely, to let it go.

Willis's teeth, always too big and a little gappy whatever guise he was in, leapt out from beneath a thick black moustache when he grinned. "How do I look?" he asked eagerly.

"Like the evacuating sphincter you are and will always be," Ashlin said, without raising her head from her arms that lay folded on the tabletop.

"Good of you to be so equable, Ash. Shift up a bit." Willis slumped down beside Ashlin and gave her bare knee a squeeze. "This place is un*believable* for sex," he said. "I've seen things today you wouldn't think possible. That's why I'm late; you've got to immerse yourself in the culture to fully comprehend how to conduct yourself without detection. It's no good coming here and sitting about on your arse all day. Non-stop action out there, Ash. Might even raise your temperature a bit if you put yourself about."

"My reproductive apparatus desiccates exponentially with every second spent in your company, Willis."

"It's funny," Willis continued, unbowed, "but wherever we go, however we end up phenotyping, I can always appreciate the subtleties of inter-species erotica. I guess whatever you are, a turn on's still a turn on, right? Horny is as horny does, I believe the saying goes. They must be mad for it here. The films I saw this morning in a little booth round the corner. Never seen anything like it. Very clued up about their sexuality this lot. And I'm not surprised." He leaned against Ashlin, his tracksuit wheezing feebly as he pressed her against the window. "You want to see what I've got down these pants, Ash. You'd go white."

"Updike – " Ashlin pleaded.

"Look at this lot I lifted from a shop this morning." Willis pulled a bunch of slippery looking magazines from inside his jacket and spread them out across the table. "Incredible," he chuffed, "like horse's collars." Updike noticed there were some men involved as well but none of theirs looked anything like his. He felt a brief stab of unease about this but decided not to mention it.

A woman passing their table with her young stopped to have a look but hurried on when Willis grinned at her small female offspring. She pushed on up the aisle and began talking to a man behind the counter.

Ashlin, who had been studying her reflection in the window throughout Willis's social commentary reached over and tugged on Updike's sleeve. "Updike, he's got nothing to say and he's saying it too loudly."

"Okay," Updike said, "it's time to get on."

"Have you got the new hardware, weapons-man?" asked Willis, rolling up his souvenirs and shoving them into his jacket pocket.

Updike reached into a small satchel beneath his feet. He pulled out three identical metal boxes and placed one each in front of Ashlin and Willis.

"Don't open them yet, just watch me." The box fitted neatly into the palm of his hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze and the top slid open to reveal a gleaming silver, slightly egg-shaped, tubular ring.

He removed the devise from its case and held it in his hand. There was a small horizontal slit in the fat end and this he pointed at Willis.

"Nice," said Ashlin. "Does it sunder worlds?"

Updike smiled. "It'll do the job. Tweaked and toned like nothing we've ever used before. State of the art exotic particle microcollider. This is our ticket to mythology, my friends. Works on the same principles as the giant subterranean particle accelerators here on Earth, but of course our technology has Occam'd it all down to pocket size. Neat and *highly* desirable. You fire it up with a squeeze here," Updike clenched his fist gently, compressing a slender strip of metal with his palm. "And it's hot. Settings from Control and Restraint through to Neutrino leucotomy. Just press here and the particle magazine automatically slots the collider atom into the chamber and you effect firing. Does practically everything for you except cure the poor bastards."

Willis's eyes were wild with excitement. He fumbled with his box and pulled out his microcollider.

Ashlin left hers where it sat. "A great advance in therapeutic relationship building," she muttered.

Willis was holding his devise at eye level, squinting along its smooth silver surface. "I love it. The perfect accessory for the burnt-out Xeno community worker."

There was movement in the aisle behind him. It was the man from behind the counter being followed closely by the woman who had passed them earlier.

"You never were one for the talking therapies, were you?" Ashlin said.

"Waste of fucking time. Listen Ash, the kind of cases we're getting referred now, you need this kind of ordnance – "

"These aren't weapons, Willis," Updike interrupted. "Whatever you think about our clients, these are some of the most unwell creatures in the galaxy. These are for therapeutic use in line with the holistic philosophy we've developed to effectively treat and contain these beings in the community – "

"Yeah, right," said Willis, "and blah blah blah."

A shadow fell across the table. Updike looked up to see the man from behind the counter staring down at Willis.

Willis looked up, his lower lip glistening beneath his moustache, eyes swampy with the thoughts behind them.

"I've had a complaint – " was as far as the fat proprietor got before his entire bald head folded in on itself, not unlike dough being kneaded. He toppled stiffly backward blowing saliva bubbles, his eyes registering the immediate cold shock of losing his entire higher cortical functioning in one catastrophic, irrevocable event.

"Oh, *man*," hissed Ashlin.

"This is going to *half* my caseload!" rejoiced Willis, still

pointing the microcollider at the shopkeeper.

Updike gathered up the other two colliders and slid out of the booth. "Come on, let's get out of here. We've still got to meet our contact."

He stepped over the twitching legs of the cafe owner and walked past the silenced, horrified looking customers. Ashlin followed, shaking her head.

"It's OK, folks," Willis said, as he rose to leave, "we're nurses. Everything's cool."

"We're meeting a social worker called Ackers," Updike informed the others as they came out from the neck of an alley and onto a scrubby rise of mud and grass that ran alongside the St Helios estate. Ahead, dominoes of flats proceeded in grey ranks, their balconies painted in toyshop colours that only seemed to degrade them further, like something hideously corrupt attempting to entice jollity from despondent children; a dissipated file of jocund nonces.

Willis was still fondling the microcollider and only looked up as Updike spoke.

"So," said Ashlin, the snapping, uneven wind buffeting her and vogueing her hair into an elaborate, fluid crown, "this is where they've resettled the poor bastard. No wonder he's relapsed."

They pushed on across a barren expanse of tarmac, hounded by the dry, neurotic wind; a wind made worse by its endless ebbing, like some animal torn between ferocity and affection constantly throwing itself against them in dogged indecision.

They made their way to the semi-shelter of the entrance to Osiris House and went through into the concourse. They stood for a moment before the rusting lift doors, Updike thinking they looked no bigger than the doors to a small industrial oven. "Let's take the stairs," he said and they began climbing up through the narrow pissy stairwell to the seventeenth floor, milking the shrivelled udders of used condoms beneath their feet and scattering the occasional cluster of used syringes.

They emerged onto a cramped, littered balcony. Below them a large group of small children threw car parts around and burned things, their tiny, course voices rising on the wind like mutated seedpods caught up and blown from their overripe, fetid little heads.

As they started to head towards the far end of the balcony, Updike, who was leading, stopped and held up his hand. He turned to the other two.

"I'm going to get out the Prescient," he said.

Willis, grinning at the rear said, "Wow, alright, the Pres!"

Ashlin frowned. "You'd be better off getting out your cock."

Willis spluttered but Updike maintained his composure. "I don't see the point in taking unnecessary risks at this stage. The Prescient can be extremely useful at times like this when we don't know what we're walking into. You've both seen the research; Prescients have an over seventy-five percent accuracy in field situations."

"They're unlicenced, unreliable and if you base a clinical decision on a reading and it all goes to shit you get struck off," said Ashlin, "pretty fucking simple."

Updike was already reaching into his satchel. Not looking up, he said, "I use mine as a sixth sense, a guideline, a safeguard."

"I'd heard you used it as a sex aid," Willis contributed.

Updike ignored him and pulled out a small aluminium cage.

"Ahh," said Willis.

Curled up in the cage was a little furry orange creature. Its narrow flanks rose and fell softly in sleep. Its nose twitched.

Updike opened a door in the top of the cage and reached in. He scooped the creature up and held it in his palm. It awoke, blinked and looked blearily around.

Updike squatted down and placed the Prescient on the pitted concrete walkway then stood up allowing the creature time to sniff about and orientate itself. He wiped a drop of urine off on his trousers.

"I read somewhere that a Prescient hunch saved the life of a community nurse on one of the lunar settlements orbiting the binary gas giant Toon in our galactic catchment area only last month," Updike said.

"They're all wankers out there," Ashlin said, a sour expression on her face. "Newly qualified bastards getting settled in on a piece-of-piss rehab moon. What happened? Prescient get a bad feeling in the day centre? Had they under-heated the cook-chill?"

"Just shut up and watch," Updike said and the three of them waited as the Prescient snuffled up the walkway, pausing occasionally to twitch its snout at something. It reached the door to the last flat, sat up on its haunches and bobbed up and down. Then it settled back onto all fours and came wandering back, climbing unhurriedly onto Updike's cupped palm.

Updike stood up and held the creature to his ear. He nodded.

Ashlin and Willis exchanged glances.

Updike nodded again, his eyes narrowing. "Mmmhmm," he said and turned to the others.

"Auberjonois doesn't like it," he said, "he's got a bad feeling."

"Oh my God, you named the Pres!" crowed Willis. "You *twat*."

"So what now?" Ashlin asked, "we call for backup on the strength of a weak diagnostic tool's generalised anxiety?"

Updike caged the Prescient and replaced it in his satchel. He was quite clearly regulating his breathing and counting silently in his head in an attempt to remain calm.

"We proceed with caution," he said finally, through gritted teeth.

Willis nudged Ashlin forward with his hip. "Come on, Ash, let's get on with it, girl."

They continued along the walkway until they reached the last flat in the row. On their way they noticed that the flat next door had been forcibly entered. The door hung off its hinges and splinters of yellow wood lay strewn across the gangway.

Ashlin backtracked and said, "I'll check this out." She left Updike and Willis where they were and gingerly pushed the shattered door open with the heel of her hand.

Willis was squatting and poking at the letterbox in front of him. He frowned and wiped at a lumpy auburn smear.

"In this culture," he informed Updike, "it's common practice for individuals disapproving of certain elements within their society to display their dissatisfaction by putting dogshit through the undesirable's letterbox. And this," Willis sniffed his finger and held it out for Updike to assess, "is definitely dogshit."

Ashlin shrieked.

Updike and Willis simultaneously pulled their microcolliders from their jackets. Willis gave Updike an almost imperceptible knowing look and headed towards the flat next door. He kicked the door open and shouldered his way in, microcollider on Acuphase.

He stopped short and lowered the collider. Ashlin was standing in the middle of the small, filthy kitchen amidst a scattered shoal of cutlery, trying to wipe the slithered remains of a small dachsund from the sole of her shoe with a pan scourer.

She waved Willis away without looking up, her top lip curled sourly in disgust; whether at Willis's posturing heroics or at the canine residue dangling from her fingers, it was unclear.

"Grotesque," she muttered.

Updike came into the kitchen and stood beside Willis. He had already pocketed his microcollider.

"Something really mashed the hound," Willis said, shaking his head.

Updike went through the kitchen and quickly searched the rest of the flat. He found no sign of occupancy but did deduce that a struggle had taken place in the lounge. A sofa and chairs were upended, a coffee table shattered and a large collection of plaster nick-nacks had been swept from a shelf and pulverised into the carpet.

As Updike joined the others outside, a small, edgy looking man appeared at the entrance to the walkway. He carried a thick green folder and appeared highly ill at ease. He stepped out from under the concrete pediment and edged towards them.

"Ackers!" shouted Willis. "Where the fuck have you been?"

The man cringed but continued along the walkway until he stood next to Ashlin.

He coughed. "I was under the impression I was to be meeting with just yourself, Mr Updike," he said.

"Well, hello to you too," Ashlin said and snatched the file from beneath Acker's arm and pirouetted away with it. Ackers began to protest but Willis threw a chummy arm over his shoulder and yanked him into their midst.

Ashlin flicked cursorily through the folder, tutting. "Medical notes, Care Programme Approach meetings, Mental Health Act papers, nursing notes, discharge papers, social service input. Mediocre follow up package. This one's really slipped through the net, Ackers. You've really fucked up your duty of care. We're going to have to pull him in."

"Those are confidential papers – " Ackers piped.

"And this is my confidential finger," Willis said, giving Ackers the shaft. "You've let this one deteriorate in the system, Ackers. You always knew the procedures, the follow up, the poor drug compliance, the potential for appalling violence in the instance of neglect. We're taking over the case as of now and, despite the bed crisis in sector 9, we're going to readmit him into our care."

"Mr Updike, could you please tell your friends – "

Updike had the folder now. He was frowning. "Community psychiatric nurse unable to make contact on first visit. Concern about probable rapid deterioration of mental state. Assess for readmission to secure unit," Updike recited in a flat monotone. "Neighbours complaining of unearthly noises, screaming and physically threatening behaviour in the stairwells." He looked up from the file at Ackers, nostrils flaring.

Willis grabbed the folder. He fingered about in a plastic poly pocket and pulled out a handful of pink section papers. He threw the file at Ackers, who staggered under its impact and clutched it to his chest, eyes wild. "Leave's cancelled!" Willis shouted and crumpled the papers in his fist.

Ackers was backing off now. Ashlin stepped in behind him. She seized his left arm and secured him in a restraining lock. The folder fell to the walkway, its ring binder pinging open and slewing policies and procedures across the concrete. An entire section of risk assessment forms slid beneath the iron balustrade and seesawed off in the wind.

Ackers howled.

Updike had produced a set of keys. He slid one into the lock and opened the door. It swung open, ploughing a thick dune of unattended mail against the wall. He stepped inside. Ashlin forced Ackers through and Willis followed, dreamy-eyed and fiddling with the settings on his microcollider.

They went through to the living room. Ashlin released Ackers and sent him sprawling into a corner. He collided with a pouffe and collapsed, one of his brogues flying off. Winded and tearful, he sat trembling against the wall.

"Okay," Updike said, "search the place."

He and Ashlin took the narrow stairs leaving Willis to stand over Ackers, his microcollider pointing at the social worker's crotch. As they climbed the stairs Updike heard Willis say, "Make a move and I'll section your old *chap*."

Upstairs there were two small bedrooms and a toilet. Ashlin looked quickly around the bathroom then followed Updike into the bedroom overlooking the rear of the building.

She collided with Updike as he came backing unsteadily out of the room. She hit him with enough force to propel them back into the bedroom and, as she steadied herself she looked up and saw, in the far corner of the room, the thing that had alarmed Updike badly enough to warrant a retreat.

"Well, fuck me!" she said.

It hung there halfway between floor and ceiling pressed into the angle where two walls met, suspended by filaments like something in traction. Its wrists and ankles were bound, the hands and feet black and swollen. Its long mottled body was naked and delicately veined, the flesh almost transparent. It twisted its neck slowly and stared down at them with eyes like stumps of suns, cheeks blown out with dreadful exertion. Its lips were pursed and blue. It opened its mouth and a string of black saliva poured out.

As they watched, pores the size of button holes opened along its flanks and extruded thin lengths of greasy cilia. These spooled from the openings and began writhing across the walls with a horrible, oily rapidity, reaching round the room towards the door.

"Willis!" yelled Ashlin, "Get up here now!"

Above the damp, rattling sound of the cilia blundering over the walls, they heard Willis curse and bark an order at Ackers. Then, heavy footsteps and Willis appeared at the head of the stairs, shoving Ackers in front of him. Ackers's eyes were very wide and terrified in the gloom of the stairwell.

Willis grabbed Ackers's collar and propelled him into the room. "Look at the state of him," he said. "Look what happens when people don't do their job!"

Ackers staggered into the bedroom. There was no carpet,

just grey linoleum, and his socked foot slid out from under him and he fell, cracking the underside of his jaw on the metal bed frame. He cried out and knelt there dazed and shuddering. He slowly lifted his head and looked up at the thing hanging in the corner of the room.

Ackers let out of short, mushy shriek and tried to get up but was too debilitated by the blow to his jaw. A thin spray of blood fanned from his mouth and laced the stained yellow top sheet.

Willis was fuming. "He's lost his phenotype. You've left him to rot. This is what happens, this is what *frigging happens* when you don't do the follow ups! They'll only maintain the forms we give them if you *follow them up*!"

Then, without warning and with a horrid sucking sound, the thing dislodged itself and slumped to the floor. They could see the hump of its back over the top of the bed. It was still casting out tendrils from the spinnerets along its flanks and these now began to drop away from the walls and nose towards the man kneeling in the centre of the room.

Suddenly, with a nightmarish rapidity, it scuttled out from the narrow aisle between bed and wall and was on Ackers before he had a chance to cry out. The cilia flew around him like whips and then he *did* cry out. He screamed. Ackers threw back his head, bound as he was by the creatures stinging fibres, and roared, eyes bulging with agony of an order of magnitude that was enough to stop his heart. The fibres hissed and burned through his clothes into his flesh. His fingers spasmed so powerfully that his wedding ring flew off and rolled in a lazy arc across the floor, coming to rest against Ashlin's foot.

Updike shouted, "Set microcolliders for emergency phenotype!"

Ashlin and Willis drew their colliders and reconfigured them. All three pointed them at the creature enveloping Ackers, but before they could fire, something unknotted from its belly, a plate of knives, and it drilled out Ackers's chest in a single rotation. They heard a wet rattle of fragmenting ribcage and a thick sheet of fatty blood bucketed to the floor.

"Oh, my *heaven*!" gasped Ashlin and stepped forward and fired her collider directly at the thing's head. It glowed in her hand, bright blue, cornflower blue, the colour of mad eyes, and issued a strange, high pitched warbling whistle. Then it discharged an invisible stream of phenotyping atoms into the thing's face. Updike and Willis stepped into the room and stood either side of Ashlin. They fired.

Updike circled away from Ashlin and came around behind the creature, still playing the collider beam across it. Willis did likewise and the three of them stood in a triangle, the creature transfixed at their centre.

"It's working!" shouted Willis.

The creature was withdrawing its cilia. It sat trembling under the force of the beams.

They stood, microcolliders warm in their hands, and looked down at the thing prostrate at their feet.

"Result," said Willis.

Updike slowly walked to the door. He bent down to retrieve his satchel.

"Let's get this mess cleaned up," he said.

The squad cars and the riot van arrived as they were forcing the bin bag containing Ackers down the disposal chute. Willis, who was bracing his back against the load, heard the sirens and screech of brakes. He shoved, pushing against the wall of the stairwell with the soles of his sandals and with a prolonged squeal the black sack disappeared down the chute.

"Sounds like they've brought the dogs," Willis said. "Shit."

Handover. One-thirty pm. Acute psychiatric ward for working age adults. Nursing office. Charge nurse Kunkun:

"I've never seen anything like it in my life. Police bring in four people at once, three of them sharing the most complex delusional system I've ever come across, the fourth one catatonic. They've got nothing on them to identify themselves but one of them has this neglected gerbil in a cage in his bag. It looks like he's dyed it orange with food colouring and stuck some sort of rubber antennae on its ears. The consultant is assessing him at the moment, but my guess would be a florid psychosis. He's with this smutty little personality disorder, foulest mouth on her. We've stuck her in a side room on discrete observations. The third guy is all over the place. Must be hypomanic. He's presenting with pressure of speech, flight of ideas, he's sexually disinhibited and grandiose. We've had to deck the cunt twice already and jab him. He's sleeping it off in the safe area. He's the one the police say caved the cafe owner's head in with the edge of a dinner plate or something. Fucking strewth. He's on two to one, but I'll have him shipped over to the secure unit this afternoon as soon as they get a bed.

"They're all reporting the same story. It's incredible; no insight whatsoever. They're aliens. Aren't they all? Alien psychiatric nurses. I've *got* to read this off the admission assessment: *we're on a programme to set up innovative social resettlement initiatives on various planets we consider to have forward thinking community care packages. Earth, with its policies such as supervised discharge, supported accommodation and care programme approach was contacted secretly a year ago in order to share information and set up some experimental discharge and maintenance cases for the purpose of monitoring success for future placements*. This is all government endorsed, of course.

"*We were headhunted by the Central Outer-Arm Mental Health Commission to head up a team of community workers to resettle and rehabilitate the larger part of eight million mentally disordered beings from the seven hundred planets throughout our galactic catchment area. Most of these individuals are assessed for resettlement dependent on history of presenting illness, prognosis, drug compliance and level of institutionalisation. Also to address the problem of a chronic shortage of beds.* Like we haven't got the same bloody problem.

"Separate assessments have them all saying the same thing. The fourth chap hasn't said a word. Just lies there staring at the ceiling, grinning. No information on him at all just that the police say they found him lying at the top of the stairs in the flat where they picked up the others. Who he really is we haven't got a fucking danny but allegedly he's their patient, a Middleton Tox, who they were assessing for possible readmission into their inpatient system.

"They take on the forms of the species they work amongst, report only to a specialised team of government approved social workers and council chiefs, and provide the patient with a new form so it can remain undetected. Fascinates me. This Updike says something fucked up and it's urgent that they're allowed to continue with their work. He was very agitated when he went in with the doc."

Dr Voudros was assessing Updike. A student nurse was in attendance because Charge Nurse Kunkun had thought it might be a good learning experience for her. She held Updike's stained gerbil in her hands, occasionally tickling its ears as she listened to the psychiatrist.

"Sometimes when people become unwell they believe they can hear voices, Mr Updike. Do you ever experience such things?"

Updike sat bolt upright on the edge of his chair. A cracked mug of cold coffee sat untouched beside him. It wasn't his. It had just been in there when he was shown into the room. A small plastic medicine pot was in his hand and he rattled the contents impatiently, having so far refused to take the medication he had been offered.

"Sometimes, people believe that something is putting thoughts into their head or removing them," Dr Voudros prompted. "You experience this, yes?"

Updike craned his neck to look past the consultant's sagely nodding head. The tablets sped round the bottom of the pot.

"Sometimes people that are becoming unwell receive messages commanding them to do things they feel powerless to resist. Can I tick that box, Mr Updike?"

Updike stood up, sat down. Rattled the tablets.

"Why don't you take the tablets," the student nurse encouraged.

Updike stared at her.

Middleton Tox lay on his back staring at the ceiling. He had stopped grinning. The agency nurse observing him looked up from his book and frowned. He got up and walked into the dormitory. He leaned over the catatonic patient and rubbed his chin. He took a biro out of his top pocket and was about to poke the end of it into a large pore at the side of the patient's Adam's apple when he heard the new female patient shout across the corridor at him, "Don't do that, you dickhead!"

Hoarse, prolonged male screaming caused Dr Voudros to leap from his chair. The student cringed and loosened her hold on the gerbil. It scurried up her arm and perched on her shoulder, antennae waving.

More screaming, louder this time. "Who the hell's that?" the doctor said.

Updike remained in his seat, legs and arms crossed.

He said, "Auberjonois?"

And quite clearly, loudly enough for all three of them to hear, the little orange creature said, "I'd stay in here, if I were you. I've got a really *bad* feeling about this."

Paul Meloy lives in Eastbourne. He's a psychiatric nurse. He's got two cats. He has published two previous stories with TTA, 'The Last Great Paladin of Idle Conceit' (TTA14) and 'Raiders' (TTA27), and his 'Panda Diaries' will begin soon on the TTA webzine *Third Wave*. Visit Paul's message board at www.ttapress.com

Everybody has a place they're afraid to go back to, because something happened there. Julie and I said we'd never go back to Beacon Fell, and she might have kept that promise if I hadn't encouraged her to break it. I kept telling her that twelve years was a long time. That there was probably no trace of the event, and we'd be all right so long as we went back during daylight. If that was the case, though, why did I want to go back at all? I must have thought that something lingered.

Christopher Kenworthy

The Edge of England

I'd gone back to Preston to see Mum and Dad, but also because Julie had been in touch and told me she was living there again. We'd made no arrangement to meet, and I didn't want to ring her, but imagined that she'd be willing to see me once she knew I was around. We hadn't spoken for twelve years, but a couple of months earlier she'd e-mailed me, having found my address on a website. She'd told me that she was married, that she had two children. All stuff I was already aware of. "We're going back to Preston," she'd written. It had taken me a moment to realise she was referring to her husband, and not to me.

Within a few hours of getting home the house felt utterly normal, and when Mum and Dad became absorbed in the afternoon quiz shows, I went back to my old room. You could see Beacon Fell from the window, the only disturbance on the horizon, just high enough to be touched with snow. Until I was 17, I'd only been there a couple of times, when Dad had taken us for rides in the hills. When I learned to drive I went there with friends every few weekends. It wasn't a beautiful place, the only trees being a pine plantation. The summit, if it could be called that, was a short walk up a scrub slope. There wasn't even anywhere to sit down, but once you were there it made the rest of Lancashire look so flat and distant, you felt like you'd got away.

The Fell was populated by couples parked in the gravel car parks, people having affairs, the depressed who came to wander, gay men who used the concrete toilet block, and boy-racers in Ford Escorts and souped-up Minis. These would-be racing drivers were drawn there because the single track road that looped around the fell was one-way, making it feel like a circuit. Almost every time you went up you'd see a car, covered in racing stickers, up-ended at the side of the road, surrounded by teenage boys who weren't sure what to do next.

From my bedroom window I tried to look across the fields to the north, but I kept looking back at the Fell. With the faint snow around its top, I could imagine how bright it would be up there. I was tempted to ring Julie straight away, to see if she wanted to go back, but knew it was pointless. Even if she agreed, it would be dark in an hour.

The house was built on the edge of the village, backed up against the fields. It made my room feel like the last vestige of civilisation. It wasn't a large house, but being set back from the road it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere. We could see our neighbours, distant enough that we never actually met them. To the north, it looked like there were just fields between us and the Lake District. For years, I'd presumed we lived inland, because if ever we wanted to go to the seaside, it was half an hour's drive to Blackpool or Southport. When I was twelve, though, I discovered that a ten minute walk through those fields led to the coast. It wasn't exactly the seaside, but the estuary. Mudded and flat, it stank of the sea and opened out into water. As far as I was concerned it *was* the sea. It's just there were no roads and no beach, so nobody went there.

I went down there whenever I could, lighting fires made from washed-up tyres and white wood like pitted bone. The River Ribble was wide, thick and still, so that I could never imagine how the detritus on the shore changed. The river never seemed to cover the mud, which sagged and split when it dried. I'd be afraid, sometimes, to be alone in all that space. Dad asked why I went there so often, and I said it was because it had always been hidden.

"I knew that place," Dad said warmly. "When ships still came to the port, you'd see them sailing through the fields from here."

I couldn't believe he'd always known. If it meant so much to me, how could the place be so ordinary to him?

"That's when you became interested in the hidden," Julie said when I told her the story. "It's this house. It's on the edge. Liminal." I didn't even know what the word meant when I was 18. She was right about the house, but wrong about when it began.

For some people, the place they fear most is home, but that was never the case for me. There'd been no major problems there, other than those that I encouraged. Mum and Dad were always fine. Of more concern to me were some of the people; those that never managed to get away from Preston. Whenever

I went back, I'd try to catch up with Paul Harbour, not out of friendship, or duty, so much as a need to see how he was coping. Ringing a string of flats that he'd moved on from, I'd eventually call his parents to find out where he was. More often than not, he'd moved back in with them, even though he was 33.

"It's my priority," he said that night in the pub, "getting out of here."

"Bollocks. You'll just wait for them to die and then you'll move in for good."

I was trying to joke with him, but he was edgy. He'd picked up a nervous twitch that looked like a wince. Every time he swallowed his beer, he'd make the exact same crinkling with his eyes, as though it hurt. Skinny, he looked cold and zipped up his tracksuit top.

I'd bought the first round and knew I'd buy the next. After one drink Paul was telling me about his money problems. Later, he showed me his arms, bruised and cut, lines of purple stippling that were so deeply scarred the wounds seemed to be under the skin. Cancer, he claimed. Chemotherapy. That's why he was too exhausted to work.

"Should you be drinking?"

"Not really."

I knew the look on his face, and under normal circumstances I'd have told him he was a liar. Usually, when I caught him lying, he'd back down and admit it, laughing it off. But I couldn't imagine him admitting that he'd caused those wounds himself, and I didn't really want to believe it. His victory was that he'd got me to go along with his story.

"Have you seen Julie?" he asked, rolling his sleeves back down.

"No."

"Have you been to the Fell?"

"Paul, that was nothing to do with you."

"I know. I just wondered if you'd been."

Walking home I tried not to think about the Fell, if only because it was dark. Sometimes I was grateful for the slight fear that's brought on by tampering in the dark – it could help to speed a working – but wandering home, I didn't want to bring on anything unexpected.

I even told myself that what happened that night on the Fell was nothing out of the ordinary. Which could be true. The statements we gave the police weren't all that impressive. When you looked at the facts, it wasn't particularly strange. Julie and I had parked on the Fell in the late afternoon, to talk. Outside, there was a man in a Barbour coat. We noticed him because he'd passed the car several times, but never looked in at us. I drove us to one of the other car parks, and he appeared again. We were a little afraid, because he'd made it to the other side of the Fell with alarming speed. We locked the doors, drove away again, parking at the smallest car park, close to the trees. After a while we stopped talking about him. Soon after we'd relaxed, we saw him again, walking briskly away from us on the road. It was only then that we realised it was going dark. Moments before he moved off the road, I knew something was happening. He turned right, into the trees, and then headed towards us. As he speeded up, he went down on all fours. I heard myself laugh, despite my fear, because the car didn't start at first. I can't even remember which direction I was looking in, but I know I couldn't look towards him.

When the car started, I drove faster than was necessary, not daring to look in the mirror until we were on the level ground, somewhere towards Chipping. We didn't park again, but neither did we head home.

Within ten minutes we'd talked ourselves into going back. At first, we'd gone over what we'd seen, to make sure we weren't imagining it. We'd both seen the same thing. Then, almost disappointed that it was over, I drove back. We didn't even put any safeguards in place, because we were so eager to see him again.

We found him in the same car park, but in his own car now. I killed the lights, which enabled us to get close, but I don't think he'd have noticed us anyway. There was a rhythm to his body, indicating masturbation. Julie took the registration number, writing it on a scrap of paper, while I watched him. His head was thrown back, face pale with illumination. I could never work out where that light came from.

We told the police that we'd been followed, chased even.

The police sergeant looked weary, unimpressed. "Could he have been gay? Looking for a man?"

"I really don't know."

"People go there to kill themselves," he informed us dryly, as though that might explain what we'd seen.

It was only when he took my statement, and I mentioned that the man had gone down on all fours, that the sergeant perked up. "How did he manage that?"

"I don't know."

"Can you show me?"

I was reluctant to act it out, although I did try in later days, just to see if it could be done. I've never been able to get up much speed, or to feel comfortable. That's why it's so disturbing. Once he'd gone down, he'd moved fast, and it looked like that was more natural to him than walking.

I wondered if we'd exaggerated things. Imagination is such a huge part of our workings, it's almost accepted that you're going to be fantasy-prone. It makes it easier for things to happen. I might have taken some comfort from this idea, except that the sergeant became obsessed by the registration number.

"You wrote it down?"

"Yes, at the time. Then we memorised it."

"So where's the paper now?"

"We lost it," Julie said, but the truth was it had been burned. From the look on his face, the sergeant appeared to have guessed.

"You're sure it's the same number then?"

We nodded.

"I want that paper," he said.

Outside we stopped on the flagged area by the courthouse, cold, even though it was a bright, cloudy day. Julie said, "Do you think he was onto something, with the paper?" But I'd had enough by then and just wanted to go home.

The next morning an unusual shift in the weather meant hard rain was followed by severe frost. It made the roads lethal and the air as clear as I've ever seen it. From my window, I could make out the snowy mountains of the Lake District, tiny, but as bright as the moon. I'd never seen anything that far away.

It was always on that side of the house, close to the open space of fields, that I'd carried out my practice. It began when I was twelve. I'd never read anything about magic, so with no fear of performing an incompetent ritual or making a mistake, I simply acted out what I felt would make a difference to the world. I don't know why I thought that my rituals might work, but the belief possibly came about because of my attachment to objects. I was always carrying around some token or other that helped me feel safe; a plastic Esso man, a cracked golf ball, even some old fur earrings. These objects had no use or beauty, but I grew attached to them, and felt uneasy if ever they were lost.

I burned the plastic Esso man the day after I broke up with Suzette. She was my first girlfriend, and despite the fact that Preston holds the record for pre-teen pregnancies, we'd never even kissed. I went round one afternoon – I remember the sky was racing with low cloud – and by the time I'd left, she'd told me it was over. I went home and attached her photograph to a tree by impaling it with a knife. I melted the Esso man onto

her image. It wasn't a curse, but a way of closing off, dealing with my feelings rather than hers. If I'd used any other object, anything trivial, there wouldn't have been the same effect. The personal, when destroyed, is an excellent source. I didn't set fire to the photograph, but it was ignited by the plastic, its edges turning to a fragile cobweb of ash.

I rang Julie as soon as I woke, but her husband answered. He said she was taking the kids to school. He was in a rush and didn't even want to know who I was. Mum and Dad had put the television on already, so I went out.

The road between Preston and Tarleton makes you realise how close we are to the edge of England, the fields breaking into bogs and moss, cracked with puddles and ditches. Nothing rises above the horizon, apart from the distant pylons and gas holders. It was cold, threatening to snow, or at least rain, but I was still reminded of the April evening when I first drove this way to take Julie out.

We'd been together all of that day, and she'd taken me to Southport. It was 1986, so the bookshops and cafes had been briefly turned into wine bars. We weren't quite 18, so we enjoyed the novelty, and sat in one all afternoon. The place still smelt of paint and new carpets, the mirrors making it impossible to look away without catching sight of ourselves. We'd been going for walks and talking in the sixth-form common room for months. Everybody else accepted that we'd go out with each other, but this was the first time we'd been together outside college. The wine had worn off by the time she asked me if I liked her.

We arranged to go out for dinner – something I'd never done, except with Mum and Dad – so I went home, got changed, and already finding myself late, drove back to pick her up. It was going dark at ground level, the streetlights on. The sun had gone, but left a brightness in the clear sky. It had rained, so the roads were shining. On the long road through the fields I pulled out to pass a lorry. Somebody pulled out from the other direction, but I was too far gone to pull back in, so braked, the car floating into a skid. Water broke around me, the colour of the sun, and I seemed to speed up as the sound fell away. Even at the time, I was convinced the road had been made slippery, not by the water, but by an excess of light.

I've looked for the same conditions a hundred times, driving back to Julie's house. Even after she went to Uni, and later when she was married, if ever I was in Preston, I'd drive the same route to her old house, hoping to catch the sunset, to catch the light. It never happened, but I remained convinced that if I could recreate the exact conditions, something would start up between us again. It's similar to the effect you aim for with simple rituals. By repeating a chant or a movement, and associating it with an imagined intention, you bring about that change. Of course, the problem with ritual is that even when all the conditions are met, it's your state of mind that counts. You need that moment of dislocation, brought on by your choice of stimulant – fear, pain, sex – but in that moment you need to feel that the result has already been achieved. That's what's meant by willpower; acceptance of the effect, without strain or effort. Rituals amplify whatever you put into them, so that

Later, he showed me his arms, bruised and cut, lines of purple stippling that were so deeply scarred the wounds seemed to be under the skin. Cancer, he claimed. Chemotherapy.

if you try to attract money, but feel your poverty, you'll only attract more poverty. Rituals aren't dangerous so much as brutal.

Sixteen years later, on a winter morning, there was little chance of finding anything like the same conditions, but a sense of tradition made me drive back to Tarleton. There were more roundabouts now, but little else had changed. Before I even made it to Julie's old house, I saw Bairstow Street, the road she'd moved to recently. I didn't make a decision as such, but turned into the road and parked.

There were no lights on in her house, but after I'd knocked I heard movement inside, and saw her through the frosted glass.

"Thank God it's you," Julie said, opening the door. "I thought it was Paul again."

"Paul's been here?"

"He's been calling. I think he was hanging around outside. Come in."

It was strange to be talking so directly, rather than taking time to weigh each other up and reintroduce ourselves. She was so familiar, in moments, that I was more impressed with how similar she was, than how she'd aged. Her voice, expressions, tiny movements, were so identical, that I felt instantly familiar with her.

"Was he up to anything when you saw him?" she asked.

"He was nervous, but that's nothing new. We didn't talk about that. I hardly saw him. But he was asking about the Fell."

"Have you been back?"

I told her I hadn't, that I couldn't see any need, and she agreed rapidly. She changed the subject then, putting the kettle on, and telling me about a dispute with the neighbours about what sort of gravel they should put on their shared path. I could tell she was talking about it to make a point. She knew I couldn't possibly be interested, but carried on with the story, as though to underline how mundane her life had become. When she'd finished, she said, "Can you believe it? I'm left with this."

Usually, when you see people after a while, they go out of their way to look as though they're happy, that they've got what they want. They might ridicule how middle-class they are, but they make sure you know they're happy.

"Life was so much better then, than it is now," she added, as though it was a phrase she'd often thought, but never voiced. Then she said, "Did you see the snow on the Fell?"

"Yes, I saw."

"I've never been there in the snow."

There was only daylight in her house, but being cold, it had the quality of fluorescent light. I went to the window, checking for signs of Paul, but there was nobody in the street. Julie said she wasn't afraid, but that it gave her a shock how rapidly everything had come back together.

"I thought it had been left behind, but then with a tiny amount of encouragement, it's here."

We both felt a shiver then, but I held it back. She'd said the same thing when we'd first performed a ritual together. She'd known the feeling, the sense of something just outside, for years, and with only the smallest amount of permission it had become real. I remember the look on her face, upset as much as terrified, when she sensed what we'd opened up to.

I tried not to think about that, and sat down again. We kept running out of things to talk about, because recent news was irrelevant, and we didn't want to recap the old stuff. After a silence, she said, "You know what the truly tragic thing is? You were the only man I ever had a decent conversation with."

"You didn't think that at the time," I said, lightly.

"That's the point. Those years were so much more than we realised."

We'd been together less than a week, when she saw what might be going on. That was strange, because I'd almost given up the activity. But, like most sixth-formers, half our conversations were about reincarnation and dreams and psychic events, so it was inevitable we'd cover the subject eventually. As Julie pointed out, whenever somebody brought up the paranormal, everybody had a story to tell. There had to be something in it, she insisted. I felt, sometimes, that she was trying to draw me out, but I didn't want to say much; not out of fear of ridicule, but simply because my workings were private.

The problem was that I had no idea how to protect myself, or even that it might be necessary. A few times, I'd sensed presences, but I assumed they were simply artefacts of the working. I didn't believe in demons, and I'd never actually invoked an entity. Having done so little reading on the subject, I didn't know that performing operations in the same room over time, allows the unexpected entry. It became clear that night.

Julie was round at my house, and we were in my room, lying on the bed in the dark. Mum and Dad had gone to bed, so there was no sound from the TV, and in the quiet we'd stopped talking. The curtains were open. It was cloudless, but you could see the glow from Preston in the air. It must have been humid, because I could hear the pylons humming. The birdsong sounded unusually clear, the way sounds amplify when you catch yourself almost asleep. My eyes were closed, and the first thing I felt was fear, because I was losing my sight. Even with my eyes open it was going dark. There was tension in my body, and I was reminded of the feeling you get when you see somebody picking a wound they're familiar with, or taking dirt out of a cut; it goes through you more than them. But this feeling went on, and I held on to Julie. She must have known what was going on, because she didn't talk, but kept still. I couldn't see the room at all, but I saw tiny black eyes. Whatever the eyes belonged to brought the same feeling that I touched with gnosis at the height of a ritual, except that I was afraid, and felt a struggle. It took a long time for the face to be revealed; it was the face of a black warthog. Its eyes were fixed on mine and it knew me. For some reason I was afraid that it would say my name.

The sense of struggle relented, and eventually we were alone in the room. I could see the window again, but I wanted the curtain closed. Too afraid to move, and unwilling to close my eyes, I settled for staring at the ceiling. My jaw was aching from clenching my teeth, and it took an effort to relax my grip.

"I don't like what happened tonight," Julie said in a whisper.

She hadn't seen anything, but she'd felt more than my fear. I refused to name the beast, or tell her what had occurred. Afraid of my room, we got up and tried to sleep in the lounge, with the TV on for light.

I'd never read any magic books, assuming (correctly it turned out) that they would confuse rather than inform. The appearance of the hog made me think I was working dangerously, and for the first time I sought guidance. To begin with I bought do-it-yourself witchcraft books and spell guides, advertised in *Prediction*. They were alarmingly simplistic, emphasising actions and words, but with little or no detail on the required feelings. Later, I got hold of the Golden Dawn, bewildered by the conditional nature of its operations. Other, more obscure texts came my way, from the wildly Masonic to the sadistic and sad. The more powerful a book was supposed to be, the more unworkable I found the methods expounded. It's been argued that sacred texts and grimoires are fraudulent, a way of specifying conditions that can never be fully met, to prevent people from attempting magic. The real secret is that it's easy.

I was hoping, though, to find out something about the hog. I came across numerous rituals of invocation and evocation,

involving the attraction of similar entities; huge beasts that you were meant to be afraid of. There were general warnings about cleansing, opening and banishing to prevent magic from trickling into your life. Some of that information was useful, I had to admit.

Julie helped me with this research. We pretended it was an academic study, something to occupy us. When it became clear that nothing about the hog was going to turn up, I became more open about my practice, and she accepted the revelation without any surprise. She took it for granted that we'd work together, and eventually, we did.

Is it possible to be nostalgic about a time while it's happening? When you remember with nostalgia, part of the pleasures comes from knowing you appreciate it more now than you did at the time. In that sense, I could never be nostalgic about those months, because I was overwhelmed by them even as they occurred. And yet nostalgia most closely describes how I felt – joy and regret at the same time, for no apparent reason. We did nothing particularly special – a few days out, the occasional walk, some lesser rituals – but every moment was intensely beautiful to me.

We were supposed to be worrying about our A-levels, especially as we'd both missed out on the initial round of Uni applications. That meant we'd have to go through Clearing, a system that felt like a lottery, forcing you to taking whatever University places were left over. After Christmas, Julie and I set about exploring the Unis together. Our friends had all done that months before, when they were meant to, so we went alone. We didn't even get to visit them on open days, or in good weather, so the atmosphere was a long way from the tranquil lawn scenes you see in every prospectus.

Driving to Edinburgh, in February, the daylight was swallowed by a mix of rain and sleet. We'd set off in darkness and seemed to have taken it with us. Our mid-morning arrival felt like late afternoon, and it was going dark again before we headed back. When we passed through the Cumbrian mountains later, in what felt like evening, the clouds tore briefly, not to reveal sky, but the sun, low and white. The road and grasses were briefly coloured, bright with rain, more intense because of the black sky beyond.

Nobody could avoid the beauty of a scene like that, but that's how I felt all the time. I never knew whether it was from pleasure at being with Julie, or because of the operations we'd been working on. We had, after all, being trying to encourage our lives to been interesting. I'd expected things to happen in response, but instead it felt as though I was able to enjoy what had always been there. If anything changed, it was my perception rather than my circumstances. It was impossible to be bored when I was so dazzled and bewildered by beauty.

The only pain for me came from a vague knowledge that Julie wasn't feeling as much as I was. I wasn't afraid we'd break up, or that she'd meet anybody else, but that although she enjoyed being with me, she wasn't as amazed by the year as I was.

In late August, just after we got our results, she was offered a place at Oxford Polytechnic. By then, I'd decided to take a year out. It's obvious, looking back, that I simply wanted our time together to continue, so I couldn't commit to anything. Our year had felt like an extended holiday, and I didn't want to give it up for a new stability.

There wasn't even a big goodbye, because we assumed I'd visit her all the time. In the end, I only went there once, staying for less than a week. I went down in early October, travelling on a coach, because she said there was nowhere to park. Oxford was more ordinary than I'd expected, at first, with more shops and restaurants than college buildings. It went dark without twilight, the sunset blending straight into the orange streetlight. I'd told Julie not to come to the station, so I made my way with a map she'd sent me. It took half an hour, walking up a long hill with nothing other than walks and trees on either side. Whatever houses or buildings there were had been set back from the road. The air was so cold I was sure it couldn't rain, but there was a fine drizzle that didn't wet so much as chill, gradually making the path shine. Hardly anybody was out, the streetlamps lit nothing much other than themselves. There was a sense of burning, perhaps from bonfires, but it seemed to me that the air itself was charred.

A few times, I'd sensed presences, but I assumed they were simply artefacts of the working.

It was a beautiful walk, despite the dark, so I'm not sure why I felt resentful. I was almost in the mood for an argument by the time I got there, perhaps angry because I'd been missing her so much. In those days there was no security, as such, and you could get where you wanted without a key or permission. I made my way to her room, but she wasn't in; there wasn't even a note on her door. She arrived about a minute later, with a friend, saying hello to me so casually, in the middle of a conversation, that I almost walked away.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Tired. It was a long journey."

She unlocked her door, a dim lamp already on inside. "Come in. You'd better get out of sight. We're not really meant to have anybody."

She wanted to go out, but I complained about being too tired. She got out a bottle of wine, and after she'd drunk more than half of it, she told me she was having trouble reaching gnosis. "I tried everything at first. Pain, orgasm, drugs. I burned things, like you said, precious things. Nothing. So I've pretty much given up. Nothing gets me there anymore. Nothing that I'm willing to do anyway."

She sounded annoyed when I told her I had no problems getting into a state. I could bring on the feeling, just by recalling the hog, in a dark room. That fear was enough to give me the necessary sense of something going on.

"I don't think you should mess with that," she said.

I stayed in Oxford for three days. I kept going on to her about the leaves; autumn leaves in sunshine, against blue sky. It was something I'd seen a thousand times in films, but I became convinced I'd never actually seen it myself. It didn't even sound plausible to me, but I kept going on about it. All that weekend I felt like there might be something wrong with my eyes, a vague milkiness making everything pearlescent.

I remember those details, but I don't remember how she told me it was over. I know we were in her room, and I remember

smashing things. I think she stayed with me; there was definately somebody in the room. I smashed the lamp first to make it dark.

When you make excuses for being angry, you always say you couldn't help yourself, but it's not true. There's plenty of control; you know which things you can smash safely, you know how to do it without hurting somebody. I know that if I had hit her, I'd have done it so that I didn't get her face.

Thankfully, I contained my rage enough to avoid that. But even though it felt like a frenzy, I knew I would stop in an instant if the police arrived. That might be why I let the hog take over, to relinquish some of that control.

Afterwards, students were crowding around the door outside, and Julie kept reassuring them that I was calm now, that she would be safe if left alone with me. They protested for ages, obviously enjoying the drama. I pretended to be past caring, but I was afraid, because part way though, the feeling of the hog had gone, and I'd been left to my own devices.

The next morning I had that feeling you get when a cold's finally wearing off. You're still achy and tired, but you feel good for it. I'd spent so much time apologising and crying in the night, that I felt worse about that than I did about breaking up. Leaving was a relief, and there was elation on top of my sadness. It was only when I remembered the scene I'd caused that I cringed.

Never having made a plan for my year out, I ended up getting a job. It was at one of those glorified pawnshops that became so popular when everybody got into debt at the end of the eighties. But these were pawn shops with lots of space and light, designed to make you feel good about selling your old products. For every guitar, keyboard, or set of weights that was left with us, you could see somebody giving up a little bit of hope. They'd imagined something better, and it had failed, so they'd just take the cash thanks.

Amongst most of the staff there was an unwritten rule that you wouldn't take the piss out of people selling their old stuff. You knew they were struggling, and that it was undignified to be having to do this. It was difficult for them, and they all made excuses. "Yeah, I'll be getting a new bike I think. Thought this was easier than putting an ad in the paper." Thankfully, I was responsible for selling the second hand goods, rather than buying them. The ones who 'priced up' as it was called, had to be hard as nails. "Got loads of bikes mate. Nobody really wants these old fashioned ones any more. But I'll have a look and give you an honest price." It killed me, watching that.

There was one bastard there, called Mark Tetherington, who took great pleasure in putting on a hefty price sticker, and putting the object up for sale, before the customer could leave the shop. They rarely complained, just wanting to get away with their handful of cash. His favourite trick was to insist that a necklace or watch was only good as scrap gold, only to put it in the jewellery display moments later.

Although it was painful to watch, it was also fascinating. I'd find myself unable to look away. Mark would always make them wait while he did something unnecessary, to get them nervous, to make them happy to accept his crappy offering and get out. After a while though, I noticed there was something wrong with the air, close to where Mark worked. On the customer side of his counter, where they'd stand and fret, the air had smudged. In the smear I could see dark fractures. They were only visible in certain light, and I had to narrow my eyes to see them clearly.

I didn't get a chance to have a proper look at them until the day I met Paul. Mark had taken a day off at short notice, meaning I was left in control of pricing up. The manager kept ringing all morning to make sure I wasn't too generous. Knowing that he'd see the records, I sent as many people away as I could. It gave me a chance to examine the air, threaded with drifts of fracture. If I looked at them directly, they were invisible, but if I looked away or beyond them I could see how they distorted the light. I went around the counter in an attempt to see them better, but before I even looked I felt that something was wrong. It was similar to the feeling of being watched you get during a ritual, although I knew nobody was there. I calmed myself and attempted to bring the fractures into focus, putting my hand out to feel for them. I caught a memory, but I don't think it was my own; too indistinct to be visual, but with clear pain.

A tall lad with wiry hair came in, hefting a large box of books. He was wearing a shirt and a cardigan, apparently unaware of how peculiar they looked on him.

"Some of these books are rare," he said. It was difficult to guess how old he was; he looked my age, except that he had one of those flimsy moustaches that 15-year-old boys are so fond of.

It was one of those glorified pawnshops that became popular when everybody got into debt.

"We're not that big on books, to be honest," I said. "We don't get much for them. You could try the markets."

"Couldn't you just look at them?"

All of his books were about magic, but I was shocked by how similar his collection was to my own. A few mail-order titles, and some of the older stuff. He even had some of the hand-written pamphlets that were difficult to get hold of.

"What are you getting rid of these for?" I asked.

"The money," he said. "I only ever read them out of interest. I never tried that stuff."

"No?"

"Maybe for the laugh, that's all. Are they worth anything?"

"They're worthless. But we can sell them." He didn't see that I was joking and asked again how much they were worth.

I felt uneasy then, to see that he was standing in the midst of the pain I'd seen, and encouraged him to come around to the side of the counter. He relaxed visibly, and said, "To be honest, some of that stuff was more trouble than it was worth."

"It didn't work?"

"It worked," he said, embarrassed, but earnest, "things happened."

I gave him twice what the books were worth, out of my own pocket, just in case there were any interesting notes in the margins; it's been known to happen. Before he left I'd convinced him to come round to my house.

The stuff I got up to with Paul was weirder than anything I'd attempted with Julie. It had to be, because there was no sex, so we had to find more original ways to get off. The hog had gone, and I couldn't conjure any of the old feeling, but it didn't matter in the early days. We were able to reach gnosis with nothing more than a simple burning, maybe a cut, anything slightly out of the ordinary. We refused to kill or hurt anything, but there were times when we helped ourselves to fear, opening the curtains when it was dark outside, believing there was something out there that could hurt us. I also found that by lingering in the place by the pawnshop counter, where that pain had damaged the air, I could take some of its essence, to provoke a working. Any emotional tampering seemed to do the trick. Anger came much later, and, to my surprise, worked best of all.

Our lives didn't get any better, though. It's often said that magic is only any good if it's actually effecting change. For a while we were too hooked on the process, the effect it gave us. It was like drinking to get pissed, rather than for the taste. Our lives remained shit. I had almost no money, but Paul had even less, and as he so frequently pointed out towards the next Christmas, neither of us had a girlfriend. It obsessed him to the extent that it was all he thought about when we went out. He'd drag me to student pubs, then when that failed, to an over-25s nightclub; anything that might give him a chance to get off with somebody. There was one celebrated night when he'd gone from person to person, attempting to chat them up, and ended up talking to a girl who had a front tooth almost missing – there was just a serrated stump as though it had never grown properly. He talked to her for over an hour, but still went home alone. I took the piss, but it bothered him. "If I had my own place, or a car," he said, "I'd be right."

The truth is that he was still bothered about somebody called Diane, that he'd known in sixth form, before he dropped out. He'd given up, because he'd picked the wrong subjects – so he said – but he stayed around the school, because he was going out with Diane. He missed the place, and he'd put his uniform on to get in the building at lunch time. The stories he told about her made her sound unpleasant, but most nights, walking home, she was all he'd talk about. It was because of her that he'd bought that original box of books, hoping to track her down and lure her back.

People sometimes complain that magic doesn't work at all, but that's rarely true. It works by reinforcing whatever you're holding in your mind. It is possible to make immediate and dramatic effects, especially when binding a person, or even with a casual curse, but if you're in a state, magic eventually makes you look at yourself, to find out why you're holding on to that state so steadfastly.

This is probably why some New Age books insist that everything that happens is your own fault. I couldn't stand those books that said poverty was a state of mind, when I saw the poor bastards in Preston, trying their best, but knocked back by circumstance. But, there's some truth in it for those who practice magic. If you have the ability to make change, then whatever stays the same is your own fault. I reminded Paul of this, from time to time, gently, but he usually took it as a joke.

None of this mattered much, until the magic itself became unpleasant. Paul had read about scrying and experimented in his spare time, trying to get me interested. It involved nothing more than setting up a basic atmosphere, and then going into a dark room with a mirror. You look into the mirror, and see things. If you've ever been in a house alone, afraid, you've probably found it's scary when you're brushing your teeth; there's something about mirrors that isn't quite right. You know you might see more than reflections. After a few scrying session, this became a problem for us, because we'd try to bring a ritual to a close, but something would stay with us. I'd go home, and wouldn't want to look in the mirrors, or even to see reflections in windows. I got into a habit of closing the curtains with my eyes out of focus.

Banish with laughter. That's the general rule, if you want to beat an unpleasant feeling. It's about as much use as telling a depressed person to cheer up. When you fuck about with this stuff, it's never pleasant to be on your own when the house is cooling down. It's difficult to conjure up laughter when that creaking sounds like it's trying to get your attention. Which might be why I took to drinking. I'd stay up late, watching comedies, getting drunk. I never mentioned this to Paul, and he kept his fears from me, until things started getting out of hand.

"There's this smell in the flat," he said. "Like fish. Burnt fish."

"Fish?"

"You know, that smell you get after a storm. Like sea water."

I knew what he meant, but I'd never really thought of storms as smelling like fish.

We traced the smell to the rotten plug on his alarm clock. It was choked with a green-white oxide, and it stank. He looked disappointed that it was something so mundane. "We live in the worst place in the country," he said, "and for what?"

"Well what do you actually want?"

He shook his head. "To get away from here?"

"And do what?"

He never could find an answer for that.

It was strange that Paul should seek out Julie, more than a decade later. He barely knew her when we were friends, and by that point she'd given up the activity completely. I think she fascinated him, because he saw the circumstances in which she returned. He put it down to a working, but at the time I didn't even think of it as a ritual, just an expression of rage. It's difficult to say what made me crack. There must have been a reminder, or something must have been said that night, to set me off. I'd left Paul in a pub, quite early, but we'd already been there hours. It was November, and the Christmas lights were up. There were a few bonfires in the area, never seen, but their glows were visible coming from the parks.

You can't visit a grave, he'd said, without thinking about rot.

On that walk home, my thoughts were mundane. I didn't see any children with sparklers, but perhaps I could smell them coming from gardens, because I couldn't stop thinking about them. It's always bothered me that you put this burning wire into a child's hand, and get them to wave it in front of their eyes. There was a public information film in the seventies (that they used to put on amongst the ads), with a child picking up a sparkler that looked cold. You just saw this child's face as he felt the pain. I was so young at the time I didn't realise he was an actor, so it upset me. That feeling stayed with me ever since.

I think that recollection of imagined pain was on my mind when I got inside. For whatever reason, I conjured up everything I could that related to Julie, every feeling, every impression of intensity. When you're in that sort of a state, it's easy to work yourself into a frenzy, because even the good memories can be flavoured with hate.

Precisely one week later Julie came back, although she only stayed in the area for a couple of weeks. We saw each other a few times before she told me that she was getting married. That was the day we went to the Fell, although for obvious reasons, her revelation was less memorable than what followed.

"It could never have worked, with us," she said, a few days later. "But it just never feels like it's ended."

Julie and I went back to the Fell, of course, but we didn't admit that's where we were going as we left her house. I offered to drive, and said we could just go out to the country, maybe for lunch in one of those pubs near the M6. Beacon Fell was only fifteen minutes from the motorway, if I could still remember the way. We kept saying it would be good to get out of the house, because Paul might still be near, and we wanted to avoid seeing him.

"And this place means nothing to you," Julie said, looking her house up and down as she locked up. After that, though, we dropped the pretence, although I had to reassure her that going back was a good thing. Twelve years was a long time.

Driving back to the Fell was easier than I'd imagined; nothing much had changed. The Fell kept flashing into view, white with snow, between hedges and farms. I had to drive slowly as we got closer, because the snow was on he road, wherever it was colder – near stream, in shade.

"What happened to Paul?" she asked.

"After you'd gone, he read up everything he could on enchantment. There was this girl Diane."

"I remember him talking about her."

"Well, he performed a rage ritual, to bring her back."

"Did it work?" She sounded tense, but I couldn't tell if that's because of what I was telling her, or because we were now driving up the first slopes of the Fell.

"It worked, in that he got news of her. She'd died a year earlier."

Julie didn't respond to that, and I concentrated on correcting a slide. The snow on the road was only a couple of inches deep, but the wheels span every time we went uphill.

"So did she come back?" Julie asked.

"Of course not. But he'd made a commitment to her, during that ritual. So now he'll never get over her."

She didn't respond to that either, and I started muttering out loud, looking for a good place to park, trying to remember which area was closest to the summit. When I did park, we were so close to the top that it took less than two minutes to get there. It was surprisingly windy and my face was soon numb.

Despite everything that had happened there, and the strangeness of being with Julie again, I could only think about Paul. He'd said so many pointless, defensive things, but the most chilling comment came after he'd been to the church where Diane was buried, somewhere in Yorkshire. "You can't visit a grave," he'd said, "without thinking about rot. You're meant to be remembering the person, but you just picture this skull, wondering how much flesh is left and what it looks like."

In the white light and the cold, Julie looked tired, but she managed to smile grimly as she said, "Nothing ever happens any more. And I hate being nostalgic."

"Why?"

"Because you can't remember what you once felt for somebody, without feeling it again."

It was so cold up there that nothing should have been melting, but I could hear dripping in the trees. In the distant west, just south of Barrow, the ocean glared. Julie moved away then, standing in front of me, staring out at Lancashire, and it felt as though she'd stood there for effect, so that I would feel something.

I was annoyed at what she'd said about nostalgia, because I wanted to go home and look back on the day, rather than carry on with it. I knew I'd get more pleasure out of a memory than any more experience.

It would be a relief to take her back, and get into town. Somewhere, ready to get drunk and full of questions, Paul would be waiting.

Christopher's published novels are *The Winter Inside* and most recently *The Quality of Light* (both Serpent's Tail), which received a rave review in TTA29 and is available now in all good bookshops. Visit Chris's message board at www.ttapress.com

FROM HELL AND BACK

ALAN MOORE INTERVIEWED BY TIM LEES

Many moons ago, the quality UK press was filled with reports of a new art form taking the world by storm: the graphic novel (formerly known as 'comics'). Invariably cited as its chief exponent was a young man from Northampton, Alan Moore, who, with artist Dave Gibbons, had produced a book called *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* was a superhero comic, but took a ferociously logical slant on its subject. Just what kind of person would dress up in costume, then go out on the streets looking for somebody to hit? How would the world react? And what if someone came along with real superpowers – someone who, unlike Superman, wouldn't simply disappear after the job was done? Above all, as the book's tag-line has it, 'Who watches the watchmen?'

Characterised by its information-dense panels, complex, multiple storylines and serious political and ethical concerns (the Hiroshima shadows stencilled on walls throughout the book throw the story's fantasy plot back into reality, into the world we all – tenuously – inhabit), *Watchmen* was not merely an 'adult' comic, but one that made considerable demands on its readers; that revealed new meanings at each successive encounter.

Those who predicted a deluge of such work, however, jumped the gun. It's perhaps only in the last few years that mainstream comics have begun to produce consistently good, intelligent work on a regular basis, if only in a small number of titles. Pioneers are often left behind; Moore, on the contrary, has remained at the cutting edge, as a writer of both mass-market and experimental comics (the Victorian melodrama *From Hell* even making it to Hollywood), a novelist and a performer of vision and considerable prolificity. Running through much of his work is an awareness of English history, especially its murkier and more eccentric areas, and an acute understanding of the tradition from which his own writing descends.

TL: Recently, on British television, you were talking about John Dee, the Elizabethan astrologer, alchemist and angelologist. Do you see any links between Dee, Blake and others – perhaps a visionary 'counter-culture' running beneath the surface of ordinary British society? And what significance does magic have to you as a writer?

AM: Writing and magic almost seem to be the same phenomenon. Thinking about it, when did you last see them in the same room together? The Gods of Magic – Thoth, Hermes – are also the Gods of Writing, and the bulk of magical terminology would seem derived from linguistic terminology. *Grimoire*, the fabled black book of magical lore and instruction, is a fancier way of saying grammar. To cast a spell is simply to spell. Aleister Crowley described magic as being merely a disease of language, and the view has much to recommend it. To break the idea down to its basic components, it would seem clear that the only Universe any of us

ever experience directly is the Universe of our own individual consciousness and perception. The Universe is, then, to all practical intents and purposes, a construct of consciousness. Consciousness, in its turn, is increasingly understood to be a construct, a by-product if you like, of language. The Universe we build for ourselves is made of consciousness, and consciousness is made of language. The fact that a skilful manipulation of language will manipulate the consciousness (and thus the reality) of the reader or listener is the premise, surely, that all writing is based upon.

The same thing applies to magic which, on even a cursory examination, seems to be mostly verbal in its make-up: magic words and incantations, evocation, God names, magical alphabets and languages, the Logos of the Aeon, the exhortations to invoke using 'Barbarous Names'. This last one, with 'barbarous names' meaning any language which the speaker does not personally understand, is interesting in that it seems like a deliberate attempt to alter the awareness of the speaker by pushing their language and thus their consciousness over the edge of sense into non-sense, a completely different mental space with completely different possibilities. You can see the same principle at work in glossolalic outbursts from the Pentecostal churches, in John Dee's channelled Enochian tongue, in William Blake's invented nomenclatures and even in the 'strawberry walrus and peppermint alarm-clock forever' lyrics of the drug-and-mysticism fuelled psychedelic period.

Michael Moorcock, probably in *A Cure for Cancer*, has Jerry Cornelius musing on the juncture in the 1960s at which the decade's leading musical visionaries realised the implication of their own lyrics and started to back away in alarm. Arguably, the precise point at which this happened was Lennon's 'I Am the Walrus'. The opening 'I am he . . .' lines state the mystical position that 'we are all together' with considerable economy, and then the lyric plunges over the precipice into a world of semolina pilchards, elementary penguins, Lewis Carroll's walrus and the whole of the nonsense-poetry dominion over which he presides. Perhaps this glimpse of the peculiar territories up ahead, past rationality's state limits, was enough to prompt the subsequent retreat into pastiche and homage with *The White Album*, just as Dylan's acid-drenched visions of Johanna would recede behind the countrified exteriors of his Nashville skyline. The strange power and importance of the nonsense poem or lyric are intelligently analysed in Douglas Hofstadter's *Metamagi-cal Themas*, a valuable essay despite, or more probably because of, the author's reso-lutely rational, non-magical approach to this unswervingly irrational field of endeavour.

As for the idea of a British visionary counter-culture or at least a lineage, running through Dee, Bunyan, Milton, Blake and even obscurities such as the Duchess of Newcastle, this would seem to be undeniably so. In an introduction for the forthcoming Savoy Books publication of David Lindsay's 1920s classic *A Voyage to Arcturus*, the above list is extended to include people like Lindsay, Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Carroll, Hope Merlies, Ballard, Moorcock, M John Harrison and Iain Sinclair, along with the Apocalypse Poets like Henry Treece and Nicholas Moore. There would seem to be a tendency in British visionary or fantastic writers to over-write the landscape that surrounds them, to extend it or extrapolate from it, superimposing their own mantic territories on the valleys, hills or urban intersections as the world about them is increasingly proscribed, constricted.

Why this should be so is a different matter. Ultimately, it may be a product of the interaction that exists between an ancient people and their far more ancient landscape. Landscape, in a sense, is memory; is text. Features in a landscape will accrete identity through the slow accumulation of mnemonic layers, be they layers of historical and personal association, or else layers of mythology and anecdote and story. Each fresh imagining or reinterpretation of environment adds another strata onto the unwritten manuscript of the location, charges it with meaning and thus energy, adds to the imaginative roentgen-count, the inspirational fluorescence. Our urban habitats with their great densities of lives and turmoil and event grow into monstrous textured corals of significance, become like palimpsests with the identity of place in constant flux, unendingly revised, mutated by each superimposition.

In surviving aboriginal societies, though degraded by their culture's subjugation, we find the fragmentary relics of a dreamtime, understood to be the timeless immaterial realm of myth and archetype that underlies our worldly, more substantial terrain. Perhaps in Britain, where the various invading waves became assimilated into the prevailing culture as opposed to overwhelming it, that primal dreamtime had an almost-unique opportunity to grow and to evolve. Neither eradicated by rapacious colonists nor held in an unchanging Neolithic stasis, it may be that Britain's mythopoeic space was able to extend and to transform itself, accommodating each new century's re-imaginings, metabolising still-wet visions from emergent writers, fledgling illustrators, work-experience mystics, and incorporating them into its spreading, rapidly mutating corpus. A fertile and still viable archetypal landscape such as this would surely nourish and assist the visionary counter-culture you suggest, encouraging that luminous tradition into ever new and ever changing forms, adapted for the unknown territories up ahead. There may yet be a future in England's dreaming.

TL: *Angel Passage*, your recent CD (on Steve Severin's RE: label, with music by Tim Perkins) is based on the life of English poet, artist and visionary William Blake. Rich in the details of his world, it sets him in a precise social, political and physical context. You seem to suggest that Blake's mystical, political and artistic radicalism was a reaction against that world, and against the failure of his own career – as if his frustrations engendered, or at least pressure-cooked, his vision.

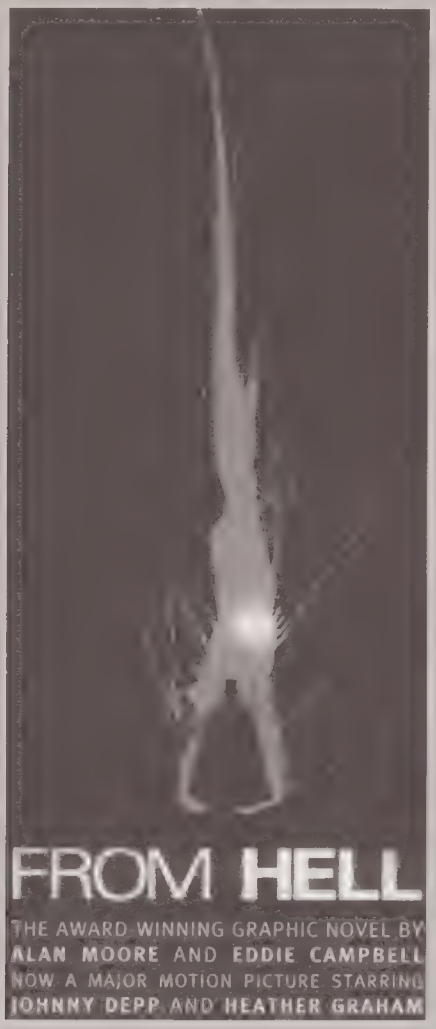
AM: Resistance boosts the signal. Willed, purposive movement, without friction, would be practically impossible. In this way, all creators have been pressure-cooked by their environment, their point in history. Some simmered and reduced, like Blake, boiled down their stock to its pure gourmet essence. Others, though, did not survive the oven. Souffles, for example, can't be pressure cooked. William Cowper, Richard Dadd, Nicholas Moore, Philip K Dick.

Blake's work, his fierce radical eye, his vision, all of these reacted to his world and circumstance, although it must be said that Blake was not a mere reaction to his times, but also their most perfect, eloquent expression: if the fractal worldview with its sensitive dependencies, self-similarities and butterfly effects is valid, then each person is conceivably the sum of the whole system (political, social, ecological, religious) that surround them at their birth, a kind of earth-bound natal chart, a terrestrology, its most minute effects imprinted on the fresh-born senses. Blake, like other visionaries, was remarkable in that he seemed more actively aware of this condition, of his place within this beautiful and frightful web of Being, than were his contemporaries; allowed himself, and had the necessary courage, to become a vessel for the energies that he perceived to be at play in both the inner and the outer cosmos. If he could be bothered making that distinction.

TL: In some ways, for its words and imagery, I found the last movement the most exciting of all – Blake and Catherine in modern London, and a race through the colossal influence he's had since his death. Why do you think he appeals so much today?

AM: Blake was timeless, in a more exact sense of the word than you might use for, say, the timeless pop hits of the 1970s. Immanuel Swedenborg, Blake's visionary predecessor, held that 'angels know nothing of Time', a statement congruent with the reports of states existing outside time from Eastern mystical traditions, or from psychedelic drug experiences for that matter. Seen from this position, everything from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch is happening at once, the whole of spacetime as a coterminous egg in four dimensions, with only the limitations of our conscious third-dimensional perceptions ordering events into a linear sequence, a progression out of past through present into future.

As implied by his persistent failure to gain reward or recognition for his work during his lifetime, William Blake was never timely. Even in his work's sparse reference to persons of the day, it's clear that his depictions


FROM HELL
THE AWARD WINNING GRAPHIC NOVEL BY
ALAN MOORE AND EDDIE CAMPBELL
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE STARRING
JOHNNY DEPP AND HEATHER GRAHAM

FROM HELL by Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell Knockabout, £24.99 (www.knockabout.com)

ANGEL PASSAGE CD by Alan Moore & Tim Perkins RE:, £12 direct from www.stevenseverin.com

have no literal relationship to any real existing personality, but have instead taken iconic names and next transformed them into symbols from a private and internal lexicon, an alphabet with a significance largely opaque to all save Blake himself. Blake's Nelson, for example, is portrayed with a full complement of arms and eyes, shown in the act of taming a demonic Biblical monstrosity, possessing no resemblance at all to the historic figure of that name.

In *Angel Passage*, it seemed necessary to reflect this aspect of the poet's existence, his ability to utterly transcend his times and mundane situation, to continue as a living force through the long decades since his death, more relevant in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than he ever could be in the eighteenth or nineteenth. By forging his allegiance with a timeless, mythopoeic viewpoint, Blake escapes the premature redundancy endured by many of his fellows, whose surviving works chain them too tightly to their period and its receding intricacies. Current Britart seems already very '90s somehow, bogged down in its Moment, mud that Blake, born on the wings of his own madness, could contrive to rise above. Like Bird, Blake lives.

TL: Do you see Blake's work as a precursor of superhero comics, with his god-like figures – Orc, Los, Urizen, etc – each with their own powers and qualities, their Michelangelo physiques, their conflicts and transformations narrated in an illustrated form?

AM: Well, Peter Ackroyd draws a rather over-generous comparison between Blake's blend of words and images and that employed by current 'graphic novelists' in his biography, but it wouldn't do to stretch that sort of thing too far. It's quite a reach from *The Four Zoas* to *The Fantastic Four*, and, given the generally appalling standards of contemporary comic books, any comparison must be to Blake's disservice.

With that said, however, one might make a case for the Fantastic Four's original creative force, the late Jack Kirby, as a purveyor of an almost Blake-like vision realised in the language of four-colour cheap pulp comic books. Kirby's so-called 'Fourth World' work in such titles as *New Gods*, whilst by no means profound and aimed predominately at a fourteen-year-old audience, comes close to the Blakean criteria that you describe, but with the work transplanted from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, the artist moved from Soho out to Brooklyn.

TL: I think we still view comics largely as an entertainment medium, if an increasingly sophisticated one. How ready is the public for serious work? I can read fantasy like *Top Ten* any time, but the brilliant *A Small Killing* (the grim will-to-power odyssey of a 1980s yuppie) is much harder to take – it hits too many home truths, its passive-aggressive hero is too much someone I recognise (well, we're both called Timothy . . .). It's entertaining, of course, but its content is closer to the kind of thing we expect in serious novels, or from the very best film directors and writers. Is there a commercial future for this kind of work in UK and US comics?

AM: The comics mainstream, as with any other mainstream, is for the most part reactionary, resistant to ideas of change regarding scope or style or content. While it's possible to smuggle new approaches or alternative techniques into a mainstream context (which, effectively, in modern mainstream comics, means disguising them as costume-hero books), the mainstream itself largely will not be changed for the better by these aesthetic infiltrations. This is not to say, however, that there's no commercial future for those works existing independent of mainstream concerns. Indeed, the comic book material that has proved ultimately, lastingly successful over the last twenty years has for the most part been confined to resolutely non-mainstream endeavours such as Maus or Chris Ware's Acme Comics Novelty Library. Presumably the future of the comic medium, or any medium for that matter, will be typified by a vast, overwhelming mass of output that has no agenda save for entertainment, illuminated intermittently by flares of lasting worth and brilliance from

the cultural margins, as has more-than-usually been the case during the medium's past.

TL: *A Small Killing* utilises some techniques that are ideal for the form – the way that comics move so easily between interior and exterior worlds, fantasy and reality, or use a stray detail to make an important plot-point – no dialogue is ever throwaway, because the reader can always go back and re-read. What qualities do you think are unique or particularly well-served by comics as a medium?

AM: The comic book format has been deemed by no less an authority than the Pentagon (in reports unearthed while doing the research for *Brought to Light*) to be the most effective method of conveying information so that it may be both easily absorbed and easily retained. This insight, for the Pentagon, would seem to have led only to Will Eisner (genius creator of *The Spirit*) netting a commission to provide training and engineering manuals for the army in the form of comic books, but would appear to have more broad creative applications. What complexities of narrative might be imagined, for example, in a form more-or-less guaranteed to fix the salient points of its construction in the reader's memory? Beyond this, what complexities and interactions are conceivable when one has two narrative media – the words and pictures – to play off and juxtapose against each other? Film, it's true, has image track and soundtrack juxtaposed, but cinema dictates the speed at which its audience experiences it, much more than can be said of comic strip. The comic strip, unlike the movie, has no fixed 24-frames-per-second pace at which it must be viewed. The reader is allowed to journey through the narrative at his or her own pace, may pause to properly absorb the subtleties of detail and of nuance. In many ways, from an authorial point of view, it is an ideal and remarkably elastic medium in which to craft a story.

Though this is only personal conjecture, it may be that the unique abilities of comics as a medium relate directly to the structure of the human mind and brain. If the currency in the more rational, speech-oriented centres of our minds (once called left brain activities) could be said to be the word, then should we not assume by the same token that the currency in the sub-rational, pre-verbal areas of consciousness (formerly our right brain activities) must be the image? Comics is, then, possibly the only medium which, in interpretation, will require an integration of both halves of our awareness. This perhaps explains why information should be easier to ingest and to remember when in comic form, an advantage that the medium would do well to realise and exploit.

Next issue, in the concluding part of this interview, Alan Moore discusses Margaret Thatcher, John Constantine, the art and politics of comics writing, and why you should always have a gorilla on the cover of your magazine. And there's a very helpful hint about the *From Hell* Playstation game, too . . .

novels

SCHILD'S LADDER
Greg Egan
Gollancz hb, 400pp, £16.99
reviewed by Paul S Jenkins

I'm not going to explain what a Schild's Ladder is. It took the Perth born Egan a couple of pages and two diagrams to explain it. Like much of the rest of the novel, Egan's characters spend much of their time explaining what the hell is going on to their much more ignorant readers. And when they aren't, Egan is. There's an original, but long-winded simile on almost every other page, explaining the complex theoretical and (as Egan explains in his reference section) sometimes fictional physics. But this is entirely necessary, as *Schild's Ladder* is an absolute wonder of imagination and logical creation.

This is a future where humans now have a choice. Evolution has led to humans being either acorpreal or born of flesh, with a quantum computer (or Qusp) that they have in their heads. What this means, is almost immortality. Back-up personalities can be stored in case of death, or sent digitally for interstellar travel. Time is thus measured in decades and millennia. Acorpreals can present themselves as icons. Those of a more sturdy nature can alter their bodies to please their partners' desires using their Qusp technology. But there are also the anachronauts. Communities of pre-Qusp, pre-acorpreal space travellers. Those who left Earth searching for life on other worlds before humans 'evolved'.

But what of the plot? Well, it's no more than a complex Macguffin to explore the nature of human conflict; how two people can believe in the same coin, but one in heads, and the other in tails. *Schild's Ladder* is all about conflict.

600 years ago, Cass and her acorpreal hosts stumble upon a new kind of physics in a 'novo-vacuum'. However, the vacuum lasted for longer than the nano-second the theory predicted, and is now expanding at half the speed of light. Two thousand inhabited systems have already fallen.

Childhood friends Tchicaya and Miriama are in opposing camps of scientists studying the phenomena. Tchicaya is a Yielder, who are mostly travellers. Their wish is to preserve and explore the new physics, moving inhabitants of planets in its path. Miriama is a Preservationist. People whose worlds have been destroyed and want to put an end to the novo-vacuum before anyone is displaced.

Acorpreals and corporeals, Yielders and Preservationists, the Anachronauts and the 'Qusped' humans, the old physics and the new. Human conflict is tested on all levels, especially as an act of terrorism aboard the vessel at the edge of the novo-vacuum forces the protagonists to pool their resources.

Egan's vision is undeniably imaginative, and credible. The physics, however, can be a little tricky at times, as the characters are occasion ally required to dumb down to pro-vide exposition. Get beyond this, however, and you are left with an absorbing treatise on human nature and the nature of being human.

THE SKINNER
Neal Asher
Macmillan pb, 474pp, £9.99
reviewed by Ceri Jordan

The planet Spatterjay is no one's idea of a tourist destination. Barren islands and oceans full of ferociously carnivorous wildlife hold no attractions for anyone, except the famously indestructible natives – and a peculiar trio of visitors. One is a explorer for an insectoid hive mind, another is seeking an old friend, and the third is a dead man pursuing a vendetta from beyond the grave. This vendetta, born of a war against the alien Prador long forgotten everywhere but here, is about to trigger events that will make Spatterjay the most important planet in the galaxy, and change the lives of visitors, natives, AIs, and the local lifeforms for ever.

Neal Asher's second full-length novel delivers exactly what we've come to expect from him: a sprawling, witty, adventure filled tale packed with the truly alien. From the delicately balanced and deeply disturbing eco-system of Spatterjay to the complexities of Prador society, the detail and the imagination of this tale never cease to astonish. But, crucially, Asher understands that the most alien things of all are the motivations of the human mind, and his twisted psyches of his characters are as absorbing as his spectacular backdrop.

If there is a fault with this novel, it is that it's almost too complex; by the final chapters, there's so much going on that it can be hard to keep track of the various plans and machinations. However, in the age of dumbing down, that's a refreshing change. This is an absorbing story that will richly repay the careful reader, from a writer who leads the field in good old-fashioned sense of wonder.

THE YEARS OF RICE AND SALT
Kim Stanley Robinson
HarperCollins hb, 724pp, £16.99
reviewed by Tony Mileman

In the 14th century The Black Death decimated a third of the European population, causing the death of approximately 20 million people. But what if this epidemic had been much worse, with plague wiping

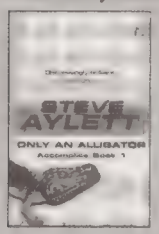
out the *total* European population? This ambitious novel presents an alternative and controversial world history in which Europe died.

The novel begins with a Mongolian horseman, Bold Bardash in the army of Temur the Lame. He's on a scouting mission, and instead of meeting a hostile army he comes across a town filled with the dead. Long dead, their bones scattered by wolves and carrion. It's a chilling start to an epic journey through seven centuries. And with Europe barren and Britain ruined and forested, armies, merchants and other opportunists stream across the land and sea.

The language is rich and poetic, and although at times I found the pace sluggish, this was more than compensated for by incredible scenes of voyage and discovery seen through the eyes of scientists, philosophers, soldiers, emperors and other diverse characters; linked by a metaphysical transmigration that gives the novel its unique structure.

This intelligent and convincing fictionalised history is surely destined to become a classic.

ONLY AN ALLIGATOR
Steve Aylett
Gollancz pb, 134pp, £9.99
reviewed by Andrew Hook



Steve Aylett is one of those few writers who defies convention whilst striving for something startling, and in his eighth novel it equates to the plot taking a backseat to a momentum driven text. If the ideas were brilliantly conceived then this would be admirable, but despite some mildly amusing quips embedded in a *freaky* scenario the entire concept becomes jaded as opposed to being exciting.

Accomplice is a town where floor lobsters represent the tangible outpouring of corruption, bored demons exist on a diet of souls, a statue garden contains replicas of all the inhabitants, and one character copulates with dinosaur bones. The central protagonist, unassuming Barny Juno, who cares only for the winged and stepping animals of the earth, falls foul of the demon Sweeny when he misappropriates an alligator found in the creep channels. His mistake is rectified only by being the most ineffectual hero around, drifting through the book to his own advantage without being aware of much at all.

In a recent interview in TTA Aylett stated: "I suppose I make a working assumption that the reader has read maybe a few thousand books before reading mine, so I start beyond that, assuming that the obvious at least has been digested." Frankly this would be commendable if the novel eschewed traditional storytelling without interest becoming a scapegoat, but with his motley crew of *weird* characters existing only to be *weird* there is little to sustain us and even less to convince us to stay on the ride.

It's easy to be cynical of course, and perhaps too harsh, but I'm not sure what is intended here. The prose is sporadically fascinating, the plot slippery and secondary. Notwithstanding a diverse array of characters and conversations its allusions are stymied by a lack of reference points, negating its potential impact. And unfortunately, despite a multitude of questions, I was left feeling indifferent.

The book occasionally sparkles with pithy phrases ('An honest relationship's as satisfying as drawing in Biro on a banana'), but mostly the language and ideas are just not remarkable enough to warrant the reader exercising considerable use of their own imaginations to propel the text. It's a shame to criticise a work which deliberately defies categorisation, but ultimately surrealism perhaps can only be justified if the reader can be entertained. Having attained a cult following Aylett obviously has his audience, but for me *Only An Alligator* just doesn't cut the mustard.

EFFENDI: THE SECOND ARABESK
Jon Courtenay Grimwood
Earthlight hb, 376pp, £12.99
reviewed by Mark Roberts

JCG returns to El Iskandryia for this, the second in his groundbreaking Arabesk trilogy. Cleverly rotating the premise of the first book, the eponymous Effendi – Hamzah, an ex-gangster turned respectable businessman – is implicated in gruesome murder. Now on the other side of the fence, Chief of Police Ashraf Bey finds himself investigating his prospective father-in-law. The satisfying mirroring of structure doesn't end there. Also echoing the first book, a secondary narrative (this time describing the horrific life of a brave band of child soldiers) runs through and informs the murder mystery. Furthermore, just as *Pashazade* opened with the forensic sweep of the murder scene, then skipped back to embark on the full narrative, *Effendi* opens with El Isk literally powerless in the aftermath of an EMP bomb, then shows us the events both leading up to and from that crippling explosion.

Whereas *Pashazade* introduced us to the city of El Isk and its inhabitants, *Effendi* successfully deepens and broadens the sense of 'otherness' of this place and how it sits politically in this alternate Earth, and further rounds and deepens the characters. Hani, Raf's neice – for example – overwhelmed by fear and grief in the first book, now becomes an essential part of plot development, a savvy (if vulnerable) foil to Raf's struggle for control as international politics come to the forefront and the city itself is threatened. El Isk has become an altogether darker and somehow more real place since our last visit. The author, having shown us the city once, can now play with it to even greater effect.

If *Pashazade* was a success, *Effendi* is a triumph. JCG has taken the direction he embarked upon with the first book, mirrored and echoed the narrative structure therein and pushed his writing to another level.

THE SCAR
China Miéville
Macmillan hb, 717pp, £17.99
reviewed by Iain Emsley

With *The Scar*, China Miéville has remained in the world of Bas Lag, but has not written a sequel to *Perdido Street Station*. In typical fashion, this sea-borne fantasy is not an easy book. It is one that does many things and subverts much of what it sets up.

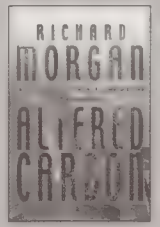
There is no one single story, no single journey, but a multiplicity of journeys; all intersecting each other and the greater narrative underlying the book. Bellis Coldwine flees New Crobuzon, writing a letter that is intended to be hand delivered, attempting temporary flight; Tanner Sack, one of the New Crobuzon Remade, is sent to penal servitude; Silas Fennec, a person of questionable motives, is anxious to return to New Crobuzon. All are brought to the mythical Armada by Uther Doul. Nominally led by the Lovers, Armada turns itself towards hunting a mythical beast and the Scar.

Whilst *Perdido Street Station* was an overtly political book, *The Scar* internalises much of its politics. Each character acts upon their own intention to protect their own interests rather than trying to band together. Indeed there is no one particular good character, each character needs to have the courage to act and to change their own circumstances rather than be part of larger movement.

What would appear to be a traditional quest fantasy, with its attendant rulers, heroes, fabled beasts and quests, shows itself to be a meditation upon fantasy, painstakingly demonstrating the limits of these tropes with a changing society. What emerges is a complex book that is colder and more austere than *Perdido Street Station*.

Miéville is unforgiving of the reader but he repays careful reading, delivering one of the finest novels of this year. After the fantastic ordure of *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville has delivered a gargantuan book, sealing his position as one of the most potent Weird Fiction writers.

ALTERED CARBON
Richard Morgan
Gollancz pb, 404pp, £10.99
reviewed by Peter Tennant



It's the 26th century and mankind has spread throughout the galaxy, with peace maintained on the new worlds by a UN Protectorate and its elite shock troops, the Envoy Corps. Consciousness is stored in cortical stacks, so that nobody need ever die, merely

have the stack implanted in a fresh 'sleeve' (clone, synthetic or the body of a criminal), though for this you need financial wherewithal. Real Death takes place only when the cortical stack is destroyed.

Ex-UN Envoy Takeshi Kovacs is brought to San Francisco on Old Earth, put in a new sleeve and made an offer he can't refuse by the wealthy and powerful Laurens Bancroft. Bancroft was killed, a pointless exercise as his stack is duplicated in a secure environment and updated daily. Only recent memories were lost. The police believe it was a failed suicide bid, but Bancroft can't accept that. He hires Kovacs to find out who killed him. From the start Kovacs senses something fishy about the whole set-up, a feeling that grows as he delves into the sleazy underbelly of society where men like Bancroft go for their pleasure, hampered in his enquiries by the interest other parties, such as the police, show in the body in which Bancroft's had him sleeved.

Morgan's novel has no hi-tech concept at its heart, no big idea, being first and foremost a tautly plotted slice of noir, dressed up in its SF Sunday best. Of recent books the one that springs most readily to mind by way of comparison is Neal Asher's *Gridlinked*, but where Asher's hero had something of James Bond about him Kovacs is your atypical tough guy and loner, Philip Marlowe in a spacesuit and set to walk down streets meaner than any envisaged by Chandler. Sad and world weary, basically honest but ruthless to the bone when circumstances require, Kovacs is an engaging character, one of many in a book that seems to bus them in from out of state. Add to that razor sharp prose and a fast paced plot, political and personal motivations for what takes place, plenty of twists and turns to keep the reader guessing, and an ending that's deeply satisfying by virtue of being both unexpected and totally convincing in terms of the technology available.

All this is to the good. What makes the book special though, again as with the Asher, is the wealth of incidental detail, the depth and gritty realism of its milieu. Morgan gives us more than enough throwaway ideas for half a dozen novels. A world where people change bodies as regularly as we change clothes, where the hotels are self-determining AIs and sexual lubricants come imbued with an empathic quality, where identity can be split in two and VR torture can endure a lifetime in only a few minutes, to name just a few. Plot and character are the solid foundations on which the story is built, but its all these extra touches that make the reading such an agreeable experience. The sense of wonder is in the details. Morgan gives notice that there's a new star in the SF firmament.

THE DARKEST PART OF THE WOODS
Ramsey Campbell
PS Publishing hb, 348pp, £35
reviewed by Peter Tennant

For centuries Goodmanswood has given rise to local superstition and legend. A demon was rumoured to live there and an Elizabethan magician built a house at the centre of the wood, later burned to the ground by an angry mob. In the present day it remains a place of fascination, particularly for the Price family. Dr Lennox Price, an expert in mass hallucination, came over from America to study phenomena associated with the wood, but ended as its victim, now resident in a mental hospital, a pitiable figure prone to cryptic, Renfieldesque pronouncements. His wife Margo prowls the wood in search of the spark of inspiration that will reignite her floundering career as an artist. Black sheep daughter Sylvia, the author of a book on sylvan folklore, returns after a long stay abroad, and draws nephew Sam under the wood's spell. Sam's mother Heather, a fortysomething divorcee, seems the best adjusted of the Price clan, thanks mainly to her lack of an imagination, or so the others constantly tell her. It's up to Heather to overcome her natural scepticism about what is happening to save them all from their own folly and the evil entity that presides at the heart of Goodmanswood.

Campbell's first full-length supernatural novel in four years, this reminded me of the first book by him that I ever read, *Ancient Images*. Given the author's reputation I'd expected subtlety, but that book overdosed on atmosphere, with a rustling in the undergrowth, a funny smell, things seen out of the corner of the eye on every single page, until I was crying out 'For God's sake man, get on with it!' There's something of the same quality here, with branches tapping ominously on every window and the woods looming at every car that goes by; they seem awfully fond of 'looming'. And I got quite annoyed with Heather, who's continually being patronised by people who tell her she can't understand what's going on, but never grabs hold of anyone by the collar and shakes them until they explain (works for me).

Ultimately though this is a much better book than *Ancient Images*, with a more substantial story to tell. 'Looming' aside, Campbell deftly manipulates an impressive range of effects, creating a chilly sense of impending terror, a mood entirely appropriate given what is to come. He does an excellent job of constructing a credible back story, giving Goodmanswood a rich and sombre history, revealed gradually to tantalise the reader, each step providing a solid foundation for the next. And he populates the novel with a cast of well drawn characters, as idiosyncratic and intriguing as they are believable, people in whom we all too easily see little bits of ourselves.

Finally, and most significantly, unlike *Ancient Images* this book, after a series of sudden and shocking plot twists in the closing chapters, delivers a menace that lives up to all the anticipation, a dark and brooding Lovecraftian presence that's cause for a genuine frisson of unease.

Perhaps the real mystery here though, one as inexplicable as anything in the pages of this novel, is why a writer of Ramsey Campbell's pedigree is being marginalised in the independent press while mainstream publishers are chucking money behind rubbish like *Wringland*? Answers please on a postcard.

WANDERERS AND ISLANDERS
Steve Cockayne
Orbit pb, 278pp, £10.99
reveiwed by Peter Tennant

Cockayne's debut novel is set in a rather rough and ready reality never referred to as anything other than The Land, a venue that has a Gormenghastian feel to it, but without the rich texture of that work. In many ways it's a blend of our own world and some other, simpler milieu. The Land is ruled by a King and there are references to a distant war, allusions to religion and mythology, folklore and legend. It's a place where magic is respected, but technology also has a role to play; there are motor vehicles and the court magician is made redundant by what sounds suspiciously like a computer.

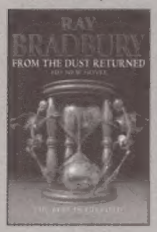
Cockayne has a surfeit of viewpoint characters, three main and several subsidiary. Victor Lazarus is employed by an unknown party to make a great house habitable, a task in which he is at first hindered and then helped by an entity residing in the house's attic, a being with an agenda of its own in which Lazarus is paramount. The boy Rusty Brown is told a great secret by a young girl, one of the fabled race of Wanderers, which he forgets but will remember when his life is in deadly peril. Rusty travels the world with his faithful dog Dusty (yes, honestly), going off to the big city to learn to be a cartographer, running with a pack of feral children, finding inner peace at a mysterious school, eventually returning to the village of his birth. Finally there's Leonardo Pegasus, obsessed by the girl Alice, at the start of the book the King's magician, a valued counsellor, and at its end a potboy at an inn, still working on his Multiple Empathy Engine, a device that will put its user in touch with the feelings of everyone in The Land. The lives of these three overlap in tenuous ways. There's the suggestion that the house in which Lazarus works is actually part of Pegasus's psyche. Rusty flits in and out of both worlds, moving from one to the other with ease and blissfully unaware.

This is billed as 'Legends of the Land: Book One', and wears its status as curtain raiser badly. Cockayne's writing is workmanlike rather than graceful. There's no depth of feeling, no grittiness to the prose, no telling details to stamp events with the mark of verisimilitude. The characters are as two dimensional as their names would suggest; they never came off the page and made me feel they were anything more than creatures of fiction. The Land itself is a patchwork struc-

ture, as if Cockayne is making it all up as he goes along rather than filling in the details of some grand design.

Set against this banality there's the complexity of the plot, with the suggestion of worlds within worlds and the hint of metafiction, intriguing philosophical concepts such as that of the well shaped future. Yet there's an artificiality about all this, intrigue arising not out of genuine mystery, but nurtured through the simple expedient of having the characters not ask any of the obvious questions about what's happening to them. I'll admit to having my interest mildly piqued, but not in a way to give me faith in the writer's ability to deliver something more substantial in future volumes. There's so much here you don't know, that in the end you don't care either.

FROM THE DUST RETURNED
Ray Bradbury
Earthlight hb, 204pp, £16.99
reviewed by Peter Tennant



Bradbury's first genre novel in almost twenty years, according to the publicity handout. Actually it's a fix up of short stories, some of them written as long ago as 1945, padded with new or previously unpublished material, telling the saga of a weird family who bear a more than passing resemblance to the Addams brood.

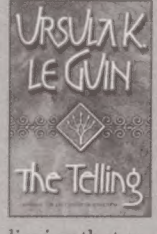
The Elliotts are a gleefully oddball assortment, from Einar who is a winged man and may drink blood, to young Cecy, who can take up residence inside the minds of other people, from ancient grandma standing motionless in the attic to young Timothy, who is cursed with normality and fated to chronicle all that occurs. We follow their adventures over the course of many years, as the family try to adapt to a changing world, one where science comes increasingly into its own, casting the cold light of reason into previously unknown corners, threatening the Elliotts and all their kind with extinction.

The prose, not surprising when you consider that this book was over fifty years in the making, is rather patchy. The earliest sections, written when Bradbury was young and filled with creative fire, such as the stand alone pieces 'The April Witch', with sad Cecy experiencing love by proxy, and the poignant 'Uncle Einar', in which the winged man must make an accommodation with disability, are just as marvellous as they were the first time around, shot through with the author's highly individualistic take on sense of wonder and rendered in that pyrotechnical prose style so uniquely his own that has the characters jumping off the page and turning somersaults in front of the living room fire. Others have tried to imitate him, but Bradbury remains one of a kind. Sadly though, the later stories and many of the bridging passages show the differences in style that arise over fifty years, sound in fact like someone trying to imitate Bradbury and not getting it quite right.

Looked at as a whole the book lacks cohesion, the attempt to provide a viable framework requiring the shoehorning in of much disparate material. The result is an ungainly structure with bits and bobs sticking out here, there and everywhere, a narrative that seems fragile and sometimes loses sight of its own ends.

Do you want to buy this book? Well for all its flaws there are moments of true wonder. The good bits are very good indeed and, while they pale in comparison to Bradbury at his peak, the other bits aren't wholly bad. Important things are being said, about the value of fantasy in our lives, a recurring theme in Bradbury's work, the dark dreams that necessarily go hand in hand with the brightest of visions, the deep seated need human beings have to believe in something other than themselves, even if it's only vampires. And serious efforts have been made to produce a book that is also appealing as an object, with eye catching cover art and interior illustrations. Finally, most importantly, it is a new book by Ray Bradbury, the guy who wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *Dark Carnival* and all those other wonderful stories that turned whole generations of us on to fantasy. I don't usually approve of special pleading, but there are times when sentiment and brand loyalty should outweigh objectivity. We owe this man, big time. So go and buy the book. Help keep Unca Ray comfortable in his old age (just let them try and use *that* as a back cover blurb).

THE TELLING
Ursula K Le Guin
Gollancz pb, 264pp, £9.99
reviewed by Peter Tennant



Earthling Sutty works as an Observer for the Ekumen on the planet Aka, whose ruling body, an entity referred to simply as The Corporation, is ruthlessly pursuing a policy aimed at casting off the shackles of religion, believing that such superstitions prevent their world from taking its rightful place in the galaxy. For Sutty it is a difficult assignment, conditions on Aka mirroring those she lived through on Earth, where a theocracy tried with equal zeal to stifle all views at odds with its own. A chance arises to travel out into the countryside of Aka, where the old ways survive, and Sutty is sent to the provincial city of Okzat-Ozkat, regarded as a backwater by the planet's elite. Here she first encounters and is beguiled by the myth in the making that is The Telling, a quasi-religious account of Aka's past that followers of the old religion regard as somehow vital to the planet's spiritual health. But her presence may just provide the impetus the authorities need to finally stamp out religion in this province. It's up to Sutty to find a way of compromise, by which the best of the past can be preserved without acting as a dead hand to the future.

As with so much of Le Guin's work the clash of ideas is central, here personified in the relationship between Sutty and the Monitor, a local official who takes it upon himself to make sure she doesn't deflect his society from its declared goals. These two represent diametrically opposed but complementary viewpoints, with more in common than they are at first willing to concede. Each was shaped by tragic events of the recent past. Sutty is haunted by what she endured on Earth, persecution as a Hindu and homosexual, the death of the woman she loved just when things seemed to be getting better. As a child the Monitor witnessed the execution of his grandparents, who adhered to their religious beliefs to the end, and feels that he must commit himself to the path of progress, else what took place will be pointless and his own acquiescence revealed as simple cowardice. For each of them the book represents a rite of passage, and maturity involves accepting the existence of doubt.

While Le Guin is excellent in portraying this ideological conflict in such deeply personal terms, her touch is not so sure in dealing with the spiritual McGuffin at its heart. Akan religion and the material of *The Telling* itself remain frustratingly vague, perhaps a deliberate ploy on the part of the writer. *The Telling*'s defining quality is inclusiveness; Le Guin seems to be saying that a people are the sum total of all their beliefs about themselves, and not just a reflection of the dominant cultural zeitgeist.

The real critical thrust of the book is in its appraisal of totalitarian mind sets, be they religious or political. It's tempting, in the wake of September 11, to ignore the timescale and see *The Telling* as in part a criticism of Islamic Fundamentalism, and points of common reference are readily found (eg a book burning scene that brings to mind the destruction of the library of Alexandria), but ultimately this is the easy option. The Fathers who preside over repression on Earth are a coalition of the great monotheistic religions, Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, while on Aka it is atheist rigidity cast in the role of bad guy. For Le Guin the real enemy is extremism, viewpoints that leave no room for disagreement. September 11 has given that message extra urgency.

The Telling revisits Le Guin's Hainish Cycle of novels, but nobody should come to it expecting work on a par with *The Left Hand of Darkness* or *The Dispossessed*. Ultimately it is a book that is too self-consciously 'about something' and does not wear its real concerns as lightly as its famous predecessors, while Sutty's final solution has too much of plot convenience about it. But it is a book well worth reading, by an important writer who still has things she needs to tell us and to which we should listen. Sadly it is also a timely book.

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